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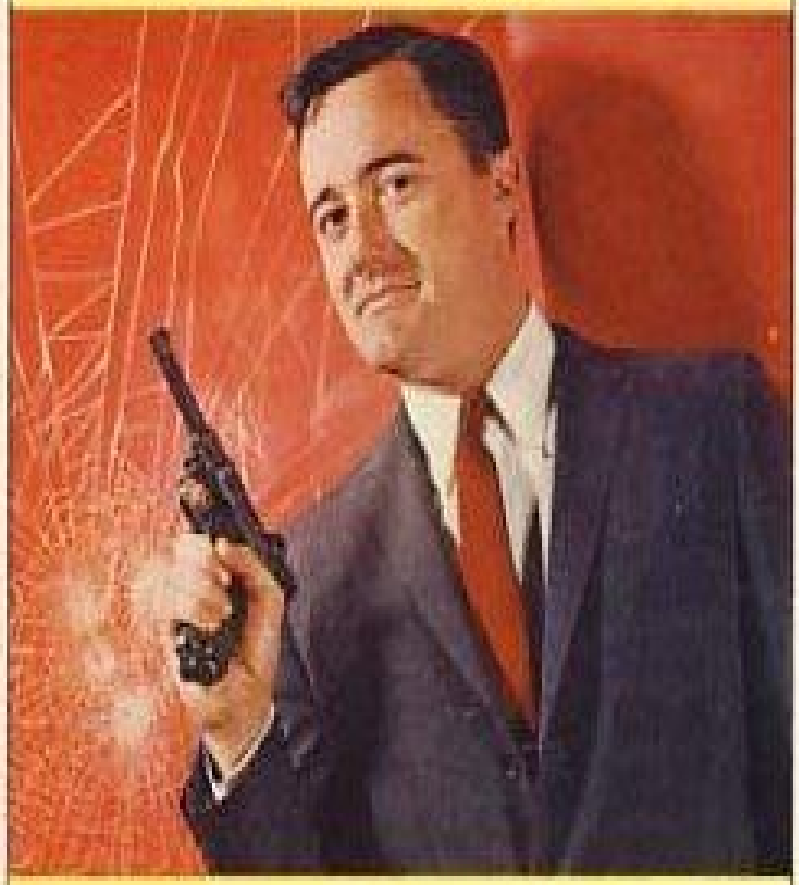
THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

NUMBER 19

The Power Cube Affair



by John T. Phillifent

A dying girl points the way to an invention that threatens the safety of the world.

THE POWER CUBE AFFAIR

Dear Reader:

Admiralty House stands where I have placed it, and it looks the way I have tried to describe it. So much is fact, but only on the outside. The interior details, and the events happening inside, as I have given them, are fiction. Nothing remotely resembling such things ever happen within the real Admiralty House. Those, and all villains herein described, are fictitious and bear no resemblance to anyone alive or dead.

ONE

NOT EVEN a hermit can turn his back on the world entirely. The air and sky, the elements, he must share with everyone. John Guard was content to do that much, but he wanted no part of anything else. As he stood now, with the sea growling at the pebbles on his left and the dark-hidden shore away to his tight, with only the sea breeze in his face and the constant beat and wash of the surf in his ears, he was content. If he had thought about it he would have agreed with the disillusioned poet who wrote—

"Where every prospect pleases, and only Man is vile."

But Guard had stopped thinking about such things long ago. He had learned not to think at all, but just to appreciate peace, quiet and the solitude of his home here on the coast. From the top timber of the groyne where he stood, he could see, on a clear day, one mile in either direction along the coast, the further distance cut off by small headlands reaching out into the sea. Here there was no one but himself, and that was exactly what he wanted.

On the point of leaping down from the groyne he caught the indistinct impression of movement in that snarling surf, and stiffened. Someone swimming in to shore? In instant anger he stared, then leaped down and ran, because the stare told him it was someone in trouble and instinct is stronger than cynicism. The gray-white shape grew more distinct. A girl, or a woman, in a brief two piece suit, and still conscious enough to make feeble struggle against the rough waves. Angry with himself and her, he hunched a shoulder against the spray, splashed into the surf, stooped to get an arm under and around, and in that instant folly became tragedy. Her shoulder had lumps in the wrong places, no working arm could dangle that way, and his grasp around her waist reported unnatural pulpiness.

Lifting strongly, he hoisted her and struggled until they were both free of the water, then laid her down as gently as possible on the stones. His wits creaked at the sudden need to think. His small bungalow lay two hundred yards to the south. To carry her that far, in her condition, would be

murderous. The nearest telephone was all of a mile away, and to leave her that long, alone, was out of the question. She stirred. He bent close.

"Don't try to move. You need help. A doctor."

"No!" Her word was a feeble explosion, cut off with a cough. "No time. Too late!" She was right, although he hated to admit it. Her face, white in the starlight, was young, no more than twenty-three or -four, but the touch of death was on it.

"Just keep still," he repeated in futility.

"Who? Let me—see your face."

He took a penlight from the breast pocket of his shirt and put the light of it on his face for her benefit.

"My name is Guard. John Wilson Guard. Tell me who to go for and—"

"No time. Put out the light now. Dangerous. Trust you with message. Will you take it?"

"I'll try."

She coughed again, and for all it was a warm night he shivered, for he had heard a man, once before, cough like that. A man with his chest caved in and the blood bubbling in his lungs, he had coughed, and choked, and died. This girl—there were places out there in that sea where jagged rocks lay close to the surface of the restless sea—she tried again.

"Chantry," she said, chalk-white teeth vivid against black lips in the starlight. "Mary Chantry, Navy. Tape cassette in my swim-suit. Must get to Captain Barnett, Captain Roger Barnett, R.N. Urgently—" and her straining self-control slipped again into a spasm of coughing. Almost by intuition Guard interpreted her weak struggles to indicate the left breast of her scanty costume. He touched something flat, hard, with corners. He peeled hack the wet fabric and took the thing, a box of plastic.

"Get it—to Captain Barnett!"

"I've got it." He slid the thing into his shirt-pocket, bent close again to talk over the surf-roar. "Is there anything else?"

"Man called Green," she gasped, the white mound of her young breast trembling as she tried hard not to cough again. "Yacht *Oberon*, not his. Someone else over him. Pretended to be stewardess. Spied. Listened. Planted recorder in cabin, underside of table." For all her trying the cough caught her again, into racking spasms that brought a dark rope of blood from the corner of her mouth.

“Chief came,” she whimpered. “Got his voice on there. But they caught me. Beat me. The black man. Green watching. Then they left me to die, but I climbed—out of cabin window. Fell into the sea. Message to Captain Barnett.” She was rambling now, her eyes dulling. “Listened many times. They say it is always the seventh stone. The seventh stone!” Then she smiled, and sighed, and sagged, very quietly. And lay quite still.

Guard let her down gently on to the pebbles. She was dead. No more problems for her, but she had handed him one. Could he dismiss all this as being none of his business, just as he had turned his back on life some three years ago? Or should he listen to a newly awakened conscience that told him there were one or two people on this Earth who had lived longer than they deserved? A new sound cut short his deliberations.

From out there, hidden by the swirling gray scarves of mist, came the sound of a motorboat engine. As he turned to stare, a slim ghost finger of light cut the mist, stabbed a hole in it. Guard moved instantly, straight up the beach, over a hump of pebbles and into a hollow, face-down and then squirming around so he could see. A boat rode in on the waves to rush up on the pebbles and halt, the search light in the bows methodically traversing the shore.

“That’s her!” a huge bull-chested voice roared. “Right thar!” Now a small, neat figure rose, perched on the gun-whale, leaped for dry footing and turned to say:

“Fortunately for you, Rambo. Saved your neck!”

“Like I told you, Mistah Green, all we hadda do was follow the tide. She couldn’t swim none.”

The owner of the big voice leaped ashore in his turn, tramped in the wake of the little man. Guard watched them both crouch.

“She’s daid sure enough. Why don’t we just leave her be?”

“Fool!” The precise voice was as sharp as a whip-lash. “You know the Chief has other plans. Get her back aboard.”

“Hokay!” The big man straightened with his load carelessly over one shoulder, the portable searchlight in his other band. “All set?”

“No! Swing that light about a bit.”

Guard flattened as the peering beam slid over his head, and knew he was in a tight corner. He had met men like Green before, men who live ruthlessly, who have to make instant judgments and who develop an instinct for danger amounting to second sight. “I’m not satisfied. There’s a house

over there, with a light showing. I'm going to check up, just in case someone has seen something. You carry her back aboard. You know where to pick me up, later."

The tone discouraged argument and he waited for none but marched up the slope within feet of where Guard lay. As his steps died away the boat's engine roared and Guard caught a glimpse of the name painted by the bows. *Oberon*. So Mary Chantry had not been babbling altogether. He got to a knee, thinking hard. Right ahead of Green ran a rough east concrete walkway that would take him up to the bungalow, to an empty house but with lights burning. That would really set fire to his suspicions. Guard went up the beach fast, paused long enough at the concrete strip to hear the rap of footsteps going away, then hoisted himself up, across, and ran as fast as he could.

His mind ran almost as fast. Like it or not, whether Mary Chantry had been delirious or not, he was involved in this affair and the only way to get out was to put Green off. And that was not going to be easy. By the time he reached the weatherbeaten front gate of his property he had a thin plan worked out. Through an unkempt garden, in at the front door, wheeling sharp left to the bathroom, on light, on hot tap and shower, off clothes to toss aside, grab towel to twist around his middle, then press close to bathroom door to listen. The hot shower spread a convincing halo of vapor. He listened.

There came the faint click of the beach-side door, a knock, then the sigh of the door opening.

"Hello! Anyone at home?" No mistaking that crisp voice. Guard waited one breath then pulled the door open and went through fast.

"Who the hell are you and what d'you want?"

The little man didn't scare easily. He moved from the table rapidly, but it was alertness rather than fear. The name Green fitted him badly, for he was neutral gray in everything, from his disciplined hair and cold eyes down over his shirt, suit and shoes.

"Good evening. Sorry to Intrude. Guard, isn't it? Your name on this fly-leaf."

"When you're done sneaking around—"

"Not sneaking, please." Green's voice grew icy edges. "I am quiet from habit, not stealth. My name is Absalom Green. May I use your phone?"

“Haven’t got one. When a man rejects the world, Mr. Green, he’d be a fool to let it in through a stretch of wire.”

“I see. Yet you have television, journals, newspapers?”

“Out of reach, not out of touch. Now, if you don’t mind—?”

Guard gestured to the door but Green didn’t move his feet, only his eyes. They had taken in a display on the window ledge.

“You’re all alone here,” he said. “Isolated. Isn’t that rather hazardous with those valuables?”

“Valuables?” Guard stared, then grinned and said, “They aren’t worth anything. Besides, I have a shotgun handy.”

“I saw that.” Green moved now to stand by the window ledge, with the shotgun within easy reach of his hand, but his attention on the carvings that stood along the tiles of the window’s foot. “I deal in small semiprecious gems and art objects. Allow me to contradict you and say that these are remarkably good. I have no idea where they come from, which makes them unique. And of value. I could sell them for you at a very good figure.”

“Not for sale,” Guard told him. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m sorry I can’t do anything for you—!”

“Sorry?” Green moved swiftly, reaching for the shotgun, swinging and aiming it all in one movement. “The regret is mine, Mr. Guard. You may have rejected the world, but if it jogged your elbow hard enough I imagine you’d take notice. And I can’t risk that.”

“I don’t know what the devil you’re talking about!”

“I think you do. I hear your shower running, Mr. Guard, and your feet and legs are wet, but not the rest of you. And there’s blood—dried blood—on your arm!”

Guard looked down, and up again just in time to be deafened by the blast of the gun, to feel the instant agony in his chest as the hammer-blow slammed him backwards. And then the second barrel, which sounded much fainter than the first, and then he heard nothing at all.

Illya Nickovetch Kuryakin, slumped casually at the wheel as the car boomed steadily along at forty, flicked an eye at the dashboard clock.

“You’re sure,” he murmured, “that he won’t mind us bursting in on him at this unearthly hour of the morning?”

“That’s all right.” Napoleon Solo sounded confident as he too snatched a glance at the time. It was just seven-thirty and the pair had been on the

road since six. “It was John Guard himself who advised me, long ago, that if you want a pleasant journey and the roads to yourself, start early. The British are a law abiding people as a rule, but their road system was laid down in ancient times, when modern automobiles hadn’t been thought of. These damned road markers, for instance. You’re on top of them before you see them!” He was watching out for the finger post that would tell them where to turn off the A road and be on the way to Hythe, Sandgate and Folkestone. It came up now, and he talked Kuryakin into a left turn, then sat back.

“Just follow the road now,” he said. “You have to admit it’s been a comfortable ride. Kent, the Garden of England, they call it.”

As the car wound its way through a twisting road Kuryakin reserved his opinion, came back to something else. “If Britain is such a law abiding land, why would a man like Guard want to retire from U.N.C.L.E.? I only know him from what I’ve heard, and he doesn’t sound the type to let the job get on top of him.”

“He’s quite a character,” Solo sighed. “I worked with him a time or two, got to know him well. About six-two, built like a wrestler, and faster off the mark than any man I ever met. Private means, a damned good education, and the kind that once he gets his teeth into anything he doesn’t know how to let go. That’s the way he was, and that was the real trouble. You see…” he groped for a smoke, frowning over memories, “… there are times, as you and I know, when we have to let go, when the higher ups decide to drop certain things, to turn a blind eye. Johnny couldn’t take that. Once he knew who the crook was, he wanted to keep right on and get him, come hell or high water.”

“I know that feeling,” Kuryakin agreed.

“So Johnny decided to opt out, about three years ago. No hard feelings on either side. In fact, there’s a standing invitation to Mr. Waverly, any time he’s over this side, to call in. So, as we’re on a kind of vacation for a couple of weeks, I sent him a wire and he said to come ahead.”

“What does he do with himself, these days?”

Solo grinned and became cryptic. “Well now, you’ve seen that bit of carved stone on Mr. Waverly’s desk? That thing that looks like nothing at all and yet makes you think of a lion crouched and ready to spring?”

“I’ve seen it, yes.”

“Over to our right, any time now, we’ll see the sea. The beaches all along here are shingle and pebbles. That carving was once one of those stones. Guard’s hobby is to stroll about among the pebbles and pick up any odd ones that look like something possible; then he carves them. He more or less promised another one to match that lion, which is another part of the reason why we’re calling in.” He leaned over to peer at the roadside. “I think we are home. That’s it. Pull over.”

It was a quarter to eight. The two men eyed the untended garden; then Solo saw the folded end of a newspaper still caught in the letter slit and frowned as he raised his hand to knock. A second knock got them no reply. He tried the door and it yielded.

“No harm in going in,” he said. “But this doesn’t feel right, somehow.” They crossed the tiny hail, opened the door opposite, and stood still for a shocked moment at the sight. Flat on his back, with just a towel across his hips, his arms flung wide, John Guard lay in a dark pool of drying blood on the stone floor. He lay very still. Kuryakin sniffed, went forward catlike, avoiding the blood pool, to crouch and stare.

“Shotgun, at close range,” he murmured. “Some time ago, four or five hours at least.” He extended a slim hand to touch, frowned, swung his head to Solo. “He’s still alive, Napoleon. With a hole in his chest that size?”

“That’s Johnny.” Solo came to crouch. “Tough as bootleather. There’s a call box back along the road a little way. Get the operator to help, Illya.”

“The British are a law abiding people,” Kuryakin quoted as he went out rapidly. Solo grinned, then leaned close as the man on the floor stirred.

“Hold still now,” he warned. “Help’s on the way.”

Eyes opened, tawny yellow eyes that Solo knew well, and then the sun bronzed face creased into a faint grin. “Napoleon! It’s been a long time.”

“That it has, John, but save it. How the hell you’ve managed to live this long with a load of buckshot through the pump beats me, but you won’t last much longer unless you hold still.”

“You’ve forgotten.” Guard’s voice was a thread but quite steady. “Mirror image!” And Solo swore under his breath, for now he remembered that John Guard was one of those odd people who carry their heart and internal organs in reverse, right side instead of left.

“All right, but just the same you’ve lost plenty of blood. Whatever happened, it can wait until the wagon gets here.”

“I can talk,” Guard insisted. “Must tell you—” He broke off as Kuryakin appeared in the doorway.

“There’ll be an ambulance here in ten minutes, Napoleon. What—?”

He came to crouch and listen as Guard told them, briefly but omitting nothing, exactly what had happened. “I don’t know what Green did after he shot me, of course, but if he left that tape I’d like you to handle it, Napoleon. Find out what’s behind it.” Guard looked rigid with inner rage and thin as his voice was, it held inflexible purpose. “I’m also interested in the criminal idiots who sent a girl like that into the hands of such murderous thugs.”

“Got the tape.” Kuryakin came back from the bathroom. “And here comes the ambulance. I think you must have had an accident while you were cleaning your shotgun, eh?”

Guard smiled. “That will do very well,” he whispered, “until I’m fit enough to let the real story come out, where it will do the most good.”

The two agents, quiet and thoughtful, rode in the ambulance with him to the nearby hospital. They waited silently outside the operating room until the duty surgeon came to make a report.

“Your friend is an extremely fortunate man,” he said. “There’s surprisingly little real damage. Considerable hemorrhage, of course, but it was only dust shot. That, and skin erosion, and shock.”

“How long before you can let him out, Doe?”

“Well now, he’s an extremely fit man, tremendous vitality. He should be up and about in, say, eight or nine weeks.”

“I see. Can we talk to him now?”

“Only for a few minutes. He needs rest and time to make good the loss of blood. Don’t excite him.”

Guard was startlingly brown against the white sheets. His tiger amber eyes fastened on Solo as the two men came to stand by the bed.

“I’ve no right to ask you,” he said. “You have your own work, and this is nothing to do with U.N.C.L.E., but I would like to be kept informed.”

“Forget that,” Solo ordered. “This is personal, and we’re on vacation anyway. We’ll look into it, you can bet on that. But you’re going to be laid up for a couple of months, and these boys may get away in that time. I wouldn’t like that. At all. Show him the paper, Illya.”

There was a large portrait on the front page, and over it, in screamer headlines: ANOTHER BATTLE OF HASTINGS! The editorial matter went

on in rich prose to describe a large scale riot that had taken place on the beach and promenade at Hastings, just a few miles along the coast, at about midnight. Gangs of leather coated motorcyclists had descended on the seaside town, smashing and wrecking with a fine disregard for others, until a squad of police had come in haste to drive them away. In counting up the damage they had found the body of a young girl, floating in the surf. So far, it said, she was unidentified. Guard took one look and his eyes burned.

"That's her. That's Mary Chantry."

"And that's one way to get away with bloody murder," Solo muttered.

Guard shut his eyes in thought. "I can't ask you to step in. It isn't any of your business, and these people play rough, as you've seen."

"Somehow," said Kuryakin, "I don't fancy the idea of just idling around while this kind of thing goes on. I'd like a word or two with Mr. Green."

"So would I. And his boss." Solo laid the newspaper aside. "We'll keep in touch, John. Just you concentrate on getting well."

TWO

ON THE Thames Embankment, not far from New Scotland Yard, stands the venerable old graystone building which houses the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, British Sector. Even to the well informed eye it looks like a highly select residential hotel slightly gone to seed, and this is in fact its cover function, but there is an astonishing amount of space reserved for other activities which the public knows nothing at all about. It was in one of those “private” rooms that Solo and Kuryakin sat and listened to the tape Mary Chantry had lost her life to get.

The first thing they heard was a crackle that made the ear wince, then the slip-slap sound of sandaled feet going away over a hard floor, and the click-slam of a door.

“Stick it in place, switch on, then go away and leave it,” Solo interpreted. Listening to the faint rhythmic creaks, distant shouts, the ding of a bell, he added. “That’s a cabin, a ship at sea. Plain enough.”

There came the purr of an engine, then the snarl of reverse to halt, more shouts and bells, then a clatter that sorted itself out into two sets of footsteps. The door again, noises suddenly louder for a moment, then the click of closing, and two voices, the first one crisp and cold.

“You saw the girl outside? She’s the reason why I asked you to come aboard. She’s on to something.”

“Indeed!” This was a large and rounded voice, full of good living. “A pity. She’s quite decorative. In view of those occasional times when we entertain guests, I’ve often wondered whether we need a stewardess, and she would fill that bill perfectly. Your note described her as a spy. You are convinced of that?”

“Completely, sir. She showed undue interest about two weeks ago, in France. The crew reported she was asking too many questions, of the wrong kind. So I advertised discreetly for a stewardess, she applied immediately, and I engaged her.”

“The better to observe, eh?”

“Exactly. To my knowledge she has been through all the papers and documents she could lay Hands on. She has lockpicks and other devices, and she has a camera—”

“Has?” The well-fed voice became suddenly keen.

“Yes, sir, but it will no longer take pictures, although she doesn’t know that. And she has not been able to pass on any of the knowledge she’s gained. We haven’t touched port since she came aboard.”

“What *other* precautions have you taken?” This time the rotund voice held overtones that made both the listeners shiver.

“One or two. At my suggestion she has adopted the brief swimming costume you saw. Consequently we have been able to abstract her clothing and put it under lock and key. Also all her effects.”

“To make sure she doesn’t run away, of course. Now, who’s behind it all, eh?”

“Some newspaper I would think, sir, judging by the notes we found. But she is freelance, not professional. That’s just a feeling.”

“You have a flair, Green. An intuition that I am prepared to trust, or you’d not be working for me. Hmm!” Into the silence of consideration came a crackling rhythmic beat, and over It a keening melodic whistle that made Kuryakin raise his brows in surprise.

“‘Sir,’ ” he said, “is tapping the table while he ponders, and he is whistling Bach. ‘Jesu joy of man’s desiring,’ I think.”

Solo hushed him as the overfed voice started up once more. “We’ll have to shut her mouth, Green, that’s obvious.”

“Yes, sir. I wanted your decision on that. I can arrange for her to fall over the side—”

“No. Not missing. That way would lead to inquiries, an open file. We can do better than that. A decisive end. How soon can you arrange one of your lamentable demonstrations of juvenile delinquency, somewhere along the coast?”

“This evening, if you wish. Nearby? How about Hastings?”

“Why not? Very well, you go and arrange that and send her here to me as you go. And send Rambo along in about five minutes.”

Feet marched away, the door clicked open and shut, and then there was only the chilly sound of that thin, precise whistling. Solo started as the tape ran out and stopped with a crackle.

“Automatic reverse,” he said, with his hand over the play back button. “I can’t say I’m exactly looking forward to hearing the other track.”

“We have no choice,” Kuryakin muttered. “Go ahead.”

The whistling came again, then broken by a sigh and the rotund voice musing aloud. “A crystal, a jewel to some, a curiosity to others, but to the insane genius of Gorchak a way of setting a man an insoluble problem. My loss that I never met him, but I’ll solve his damned problem in a way he never dreamed of. Twenty-five pieces I have. Two to go. And I’ll solve it, if it kills me!” There was a curious sliding and clicking noise, and labored breathing, then a knock at the door, a scuffle, and the voice said:

“Come in! Ah yes. What’s your name, my dear?”

“Marie, sir. Was there something you wanted?”

“Many things, indeed, but for the moment you might bring that tray and the brandy.” Judging by the noise, she set the tray down on the table. There came another knock, and the whistler greeted this newcomer as “Rambo.”

“Shut the door. Bolt it, and pay attention. Now, Marie, my dear, I fear I have bad news for you. You are going to die.”

“I beg your pardon!” There was surprise only in her voice, no fear as yet. Solo felt sweat spring out on his face and saw that his companion was equally disturbed.

The voice went on almost jovially. “This must be done just right. Bodies are a nuisance to dispose of, but not impossible if one uses thought. Rambo, you will beat her very hard until she is almost dead, but not quite—”

Then the girl screamed. Solo ground his teeth in futile rage at the terror he heard, as she realized the incredible reality to come.

“You see,” the jovial voice explained, in between thuds and grunts, “if we put her in the water at the right time, still alive, she will drift in to shore to be found. Examination will show that she died of injuries, but in the water. Speculation will find two avenues. Concealed rocks and a rough sea, perhaps? Or some brainless melee, which will be provided to order. That will be enough to keep the authorities from guessing the correct answer, and enough to keep her people from suspecting anything at all.”

This was delivered in between the thick thuds of bone breaking blows. Solo tucked his emotions away for future reference. He forced his stomach to behave.

The voice in charge said, “That will do, Rambo. Leave her here. We’ll go and check up on time and tide.”

In the almost silence of the cabin came a faint labored sound, a moan, then a cough. Scraping noises. Sobbing. The scraping noises getting louder. Then a sudden crackle. And then the tape reels turned on total silence. Solo let them spin;

“She got the tape, stuffed it in her swim-suit, climbed out of the cabin window, fell into the sea—and then Guard found her.” He looked at Illya and shook his head. “First of all we have to find this Captain Barnett. To deliver the tape, of course, but I think I’m going to have a few words to say to him first. I’ve heard various things about British Naval Intelligence, but if this is the way they work things out I must have heard it all wrong!”

The two had decided on the way back to London that this was something U.N.C.L.E. had no part in, yet, so they had made no report, but they had been able to use the comprehensive information services to get some useful data, among which was a telephone number that would put them in touch with Roger Barnett, RN. With the tape cassette stowed in a safe place, Solo dialed the number and waited. Sharp after the second warble an exquisitely modulated voice cooed at him, repeated the number, and added:

“Dispositions. Thompson.”

“Speak to Captain Barnett, please,” Solo kept his voice level, trying not to imagine what exotic creature he had on the line.

“You have an appointment?”

“Afraid not. I just want to talk to him.”

“I’m afraid you can’t do that,” the delicious voice regretted, “without an appointment”

“I can’t, but you can. Tell him it’s about his girlfriend.”

After a moment or two another voice came on, chesty and thick with suspicion and surprise.

“Barnett here. What d’you want? Who are you?”

“My name is Solo. It doesn’t mean a thing to you, but the girl’s name should. Initials are M. C. and it reminds me of singing.”

There was a distinctly audible gulp and then the voice again, but now in tip-toe apprehension.

“What has she told you? Is she there with you now?”

“She is not, and she didn’t tell me a thing that I can repeat on the phone. Personal message. I have to see you, right away.”

“Not right away!” Barnett was almost squeaking. “Wait! I can fit you in after lunch. Find your way to Earl’s Court and ask anyone for Admiralty House. You can’t miss it. I’m Roof Nine. I’ll leave word. And Solo—”

“Yes?”

“Don’t—do not, whatever you do—bring her with you. No matter what she says. Understand?”

Solo hung up with a sense of disgust and the shattering of a dream or two. So this was the form of the Royal Navy, fabled in song and story? Kuryakin, who had been listening on an extension, met his gaze stonily.

“Jolly Jack Tars and all that,” he said. “Nelson would flip!”

“So will Captain Barnett, when I’m done with him. Come on.”

The unfortunate captain had been completely accurate about one thing, though. You couldn’t miss Admiralty House. Three columns of concrete, each twenty-seven stories high, stood in a triangle to support sweeping convex facades of window glass, and a pedestal on the roof resembled nothing so much as a mighty gun turret without guns. Against the mixed architecture of this borderland between Chelsea and Fulham it stood out like something from a futurist dream. The staff work had been done too. They were expected, shown to the elevator, and efficiently decanted away up on the top level, where the interior decor was pale unstained wood and cherry pink enamel. Solo rapped on a door bearing the figure “9,” and as it opened they met the owner of the delicious voice.

For once in a lifetime of wry disappointments Solo had to admit that Miss Thompson matched her voice. In that first slow second of meeting he knew he was looking at near perfection. Her wealth of copper red hair shone as if polished. Crushed violet eyes opened very wide and dazzling teeth were vivid against her perfect complexion as she smiled and said: “Mr. Solo?”

“You’re Miss Thompson? This is Illya Kuryakin, a colleague.”

“Come this way, please.” She swiveled and undulated be fore them, her shape outrageous in white nylon shirt and the briefest possible navy blue skirt. For one female to have so much, marveled Solo, so exquisitely arranged and so blatantly exhibited, didn’t seem natural. Miss Thompson halted in the doorway of a far room, turned sideways to inflate her magnificent prominent curves even more, and intoned musically:

“Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin, sir.”

Miss Thompson’s room had been filing cabinets, a desk and a long window expanse. This room carried on the window along the whole of one wall, but the other three walls were solid with maps. From behind a cluttered desk with four telephones, each a different color, Barnett rose and stood, unfriendly. He was tall, broad shouldered, giving the impression of having been tailored to fit his uniform. And handsome enough to assure him a living as a toothpaste model if ever the navy decided to dispense with his services. As soon as the door was safely shut he barked:

“Very well, what is this all in aid of?”

Solo shrugged, not liking the tone at all. By way of reply he stepped up to the desk, pulled the newspaper out of his pocket and spread it out for Barnett to stare at. There was no need for speech, yet. Barnett looked down, stiffened, and the fresh color drained from his face. He sat, groping for the chair, picked up the newspaper with a shaking hand, and read it carefully.

“My God!” he breathed. “That’s—but it can’t be! At Hastings? In a delinquent mob? There must be some mistake.”

“No mistake,” Solo assured him. “That is who you think it is. And she didn’t die at Hastings, but somewhere else. She talked, just a little, before the end. Enough to identify.”

I’m curious,” Kuryakin said, in a deceptively mild tone. “Naval Intelligence, and you can’t get as far as the front page of this morning’s newspaper without help?”

“She never told you that!” Barnett was suddenly savage.

“She never said anything like that,” Solo admitted. “We deduced it. Wrongly, maybe. But she gave us a message to pass on to you.”

Barnett had control of himself now, his face gray but calm.

“Very well. Deliver it. No, just a moment!” He rose suddenly, almost ran to the door to open it and call, “Louise, dear, lay on some coffee, would you? Better get it yourself, you know how slack they are in the canteen.” He came back, walking heavily. “All ears and tongue, that girl. Now, that message, if you please. And you do understand, I hope, that I can’t do any explaining. At all. I could be up to the neck in trouble as it is just by having you two here.”

“I was hoping for explanations. In fact I intend to have them. I want to know what kind of brainless setup let her in for what she got—before I deliver any message, to you or anyone else. You say you’re not in Intelligence?”

“I am not. This is my job, right here.” Barnett flung out an arm to embrace the walls full of maps. “Home and Mediterranean Fleet disposal. Nothing else. My relationship with—her—is—was—something utterly private. Nothing to do with this. Or you.”

“You’re not the big man,” Kuryakin said, with sudden insight. Barnett stared at him. The Russian agent went on deliberately. “You’re just a cog, or a link in some chain. If we gave you this message, you’d pass it along to somebody else.”

Solo listened approvingly. Barnett’s face gave away the accuracy of Illya’s guessing. “We want to meet the man who tells you what to do, the man to whom you’d pass this message. Or we don’t deliver.”

“That’s telling him, Illya. Look, mister, a very good friend of ours is on his back in the hospital right now because he stepped in to help—her. We are making this our business, and we deal with the head man, or nothing.”

Barnett sagged, reached for his chair again and slumped into it. His handsome face was wet with perspiration. “You don’t know what you’re asking. I can’t make that kind of decision!”

“You don’t have to. Just talk to him. Tell him what we’ve said.”

Barnett shook his head, not as a negative but like a man recovering from a solid punch. “I don’t know. This is so— damnable! Mary! I can’t take it in yet.” The outer door clicked open and the gorgeous Miss Thompson came in pushing a tea cart. Barnett rose urgently, came around his desk at a trot and swerved to pass Miss Thompson.

“Look after them, dear,” he muttered. “Give them anything they want. I won’t be long!”

“Well!” She stared wide eyed, then busied herself with the ceremony of pouring, a process involving a degree of stooping and wriggling that Solo couldn’t bear to watch. “Milk and sugar for both of you?”

“Please!” Solo said, then before he could help himself he added, “The view is certainly something, up here!”

“Yes, isn’t it?” she cooed. “It’s a pity, really, that not many people get this far, to see it properly.” She finished pouring, took a cup herself, and hitched herself recklessly onto the edge of the desk, perching one foot on Barnett’s chair. “I wonder why Roger ran off like that.”

“Went to phone someone,” Solo answered, then looked at the colored array on the desk and frowned. To cover the gaffe he ventured, “Just you and Captain Barnett up here alone all day?”

“It’s dreadfully dull,” she confessed. “After all, you can get fed up with just looking, can’t you?”

Solo smiled uneasily, eased the collar from his neck and turned away to look out of the window. The click of the door saved him from trying to go on with the impossible conversation. Miss Thompson slid leggily down from the desk and departed. Barnett shut the door firmly after her, his face set.

“You’re in,” he said forcefully, “and don’t blame me if you find yourself something a lot bigger and nastier than you imagine. You have a last chance to deliver that message to me and forget all about it—”

“Nothing doing!”

“All right. On your own heads. By eight o’clock tonight you’re to find your own way to a place called Ferrier’s. It’s a club, of a sort, not hard to find. There’ll be a table for you. The headwaiter’s name is Mario Scarabella. You’ll be met.”

“Cloak and dagger stuff,” Kuryakin snorted, from his stance by the big window. “Should we give some password or other?”

“You’ll be met,” Barnett repeated between his teeth. “And you’ll be judged. On trial. All right?”

“Fair enough,” Solo admitted. “We’ll be there.”

Miss Thompson gave them a beaming smile as they left.

Outside, they managed to hail a taxi and told him where to go.

“And what do you make of all that, Illya?” Solo murmured.

“Chiefly, that we have been fed a lot of myths, what with the Royal Navy being all stern and seaworthy, and the British being a law abiding people, according to you.”

“You can do your funny act later. Right now it looks as if somebody doesn’t want us in on whatever is going on.”

“That much, at any rate, is familiar. What is puzzling me just a bit is what I saw in Miss Thompson’s office.”

“What?” Solo was mildly curious. He hadn’t been able to notice anything beyond the gorgeous Miss Thompson herself.

“On her window ledge. The biggest pair of binoculars I ever saw!”

“Hah!” Solo snorted in disgust. “According to Barnett she’s all ears and tongue. According to you she has big binoculars. What’s wrong with everybody all of a sudden?” The taxi purred on in silence for a while, then Solo gave tongue again. “Hold it, driver, we’ll get off here!”

“What now?” Kuryakin queried as the cab slid away.

“We can walk to the hotel, it’s not far. I want a paper, see if there’s anything more about the girl, if they’ve identified her yet.”

They hadn’t, and the midday account was patently a blowup of the few details in the first edition. The two men strolled the rest of the way, and thus came to the side road leading to their destination in time to see a remarkable incident. Just ahead of them a taxi pulled in to the curb to discharge two men, and whirled away again. The two turned to go down the same lane that Solo and Kuryakin were heading for.

Out of the casual mill of midday pedestrians, from archways and doorways, from behind corners and lamp posts, a dozen leather-jacketed long-haired youths seemed to materialize, to group, to close in on the unsuspecting two. And then, so fast and unexpected that it caught the two observers completely by surprise, the group exploded into a savage melee of fists and kicks, bashings and stampings, and then, as rapidly as it had gathered, the mob dispersed, and all that remained were two crushed and unconscious bodies on the pavement.

The whole thing had taken no more than fifteen seconds. Fifteen seconds more and there was mild uproar, a pressing crowd, policemen, and the urgent clang of an ambulance.

Solo stirred, shook himself, and looked at his companion.

“You notice anything odd about those two, Illya?”

“I did. To the casual glance, the uninformed eye, they might have been mistaken for us.”

“Coincidence, you think?”

“Or a pair of big binoculars and some fast work on the telephone. The law abiding British?’

“She’s such a pretty girl, too. I’m looking forward to Ferrier’s!”

THREE

FERRIER'S WAS a little harder to find than they expected. The outside neon was faint, the doorway discreetly hidden away in a side alley, the unremarkable door yielding to a stairway that went down into red half light and mirrors. A massive doorman asked their names, then let them through a swinging mirror into muted bedlam compounded of shrill voices, jarring music and swirling rainbow lights. The head waiter, a thick necked Italian, would have fitted better into a decorous hotel background.

"The food is good," he told them, as he showed them to a table for four on the edge of the miniature dance floor. "For the rest—!" he gave a despairing shrug. Solo smiled;

"We'll take your advice," he said. "What do you recommend?"

With that pleasant chore attended to Kuryakin leaned back. "This place could hold any number of surprises. The pseudo-psychedelic lighting is as good as camouflage."

"Can't tell friend from foe. Not that we have any friends here. I still don't see why it had to be Miss Thompson, Illya. Why would anybody want to get rough with us?"

"Never mind why. Somebody did. Thing is, which side?"

"Come to that, which side are we on? Certainly not the Green and Co. crowd, but from what I've seen of the others I'd hate to run with them either, if Barnett is a fair sample."

"That's exactly what we're here to find out, Napoleon. Meanwhile, this is excellent chicken soup. We might as well enjoy it before the little man with the dark glasses and the beard comes to spoil it."

Solo chuckled. "Somehow," he said, "I don't think it's going to be a bit like that. My guess would be one of those pinstripe-pants city types with a rolled umbrella and a Bertie Wooster accent."

Although both men appeared casual, and relaxed enough to pay admiring attention to the colorful scene around them, they were razor alert for the least sign of odd activity. So it was that they both tensed as a minor drama began to unfold before them. The eye twisting light effects had been

momentarily abandoned in favor of daylight tinted fluorescence from the high ceiling, and in this clear glow there came a tall and haughty blonde, creamy locks piled high on her head to give her added inches, a silver cape draping her to elbows and the rest only half obscured in openwork silver mesh to midthigh. The rest was long and shapely legs sculptured in glitter sheerness. She strode boldly across the tiny dance floor with the headwaiter trotting after her in passionate attempt to reason and argue.

“Don’t be silly, Mario!” she chided, in a thickly husky affected tone. “It’s my table. It always is. You can’t put me off!”

“Miss Perrell, please!” Mario scuttled around, lifting his clasped hands in pleading. “I ask you a favor. Your table is reserved. Take another one. Look, I go on my knees to you!”

“Silly man! Don’t you dare do that. What will people think?”

Miss Perrell stepped around him, apparently unaware that every eye in the place was fixed on her, pointed herself again toward the reserved-table, smiled, put slim fingers to the cord of her cape, swirled out of it and draped it over her left arm. There was an instant hush thick enough to feel, then a burst of noise like that which comes as the lights go up after a dramatic first act curtain. Solo cleared his throat.

“Like it or not,” he said, “this table is reserved.”

“Let her come, Napoleon. Nobody puts on a show like that by accident.”

“You mean—?”

“Can’t do any harm to find out.”

Solo sat again, then rose politely as the blonde stranger reached the table and stood smiling down. Before either could speak the headwaiter came running, clutching his brow.

“What can I say, gentlemen? You saw? I tried!” He clapped palms to cheeks and cast his gaze aloft to some personal deity. Solo stood, seized the nearest chair, waited until the lady had draped her cape over its back, then settled her in.

“All the same,” he said, as he regained his own seat, “this table is reserved. For us!”

“Pooh! Who cares about things like that? Bring soup, Mario. The chicken, please.” She shared her bright blue gaze equally between the two men. “This is my favorite table. I always sit here.” She conjured up a

brilliant smile, waited a moment, then, “Nothing to say? Oh dear, you’re embarrassed!”

It could have been true. The openwork silver mesh came up only as far as her ribcage, where it gathered itself into a pair of jutting platforms to support the generous hemisphere above. But there it ceased, leaving the rest of her to manage unhampered. There was quite a lot of her to see, but at this moment Solo’s mind was otherwise occupied.

“Hardly embarrassed,” he said. “But curious. My name is Solo. This is Mr. Kuryakin. You are-

“Nanette Perrell, and please, no funnies about my name. I’ve heard them all before. Now, what else shall we talk about?”

“We could discuss the unpleasant things that happen to ladies who interfere, or what happens to Barnett’s girl friends,” Kuryakin suggested quietly.

Solo saw the surprise come and go on her face, and he became very wary indeed. This girl was, in her way, every bit as breathtaking as the gorgeous Miss Thompson, yet as different as a tea rose from a tulip. He had judged one to be beautiful but empty. He was not about to make that mistake again. He looked closely, past the overdone makeup, the lacquered hair, the outthrust arrogance of her flesh, and he realized that this time they were facing a masquerade, a sham!

“You’re quick,” she said to Kuryakin. “And you,” she swung her gaze at Solo, hesitated a moment, then added, “Don’t stare like that!”

“Why not? When you put the wares in the window you expect people to stop and admire, don’t you?”

“Admire? That steely glare?”

“Perhaps not. Appraisal, then. Is that the idea? Make the poor man so embarrassed he won’t know where to look, and thus won’t notice that you are a fraud?”

That got home. He saw the red tide burn her cheeks and spread fascinatingly downwards. She put her hands to her face all at once.

“Don’t say anything,” she muttered. “I haven’t made a fool of myself like this in years.”

A waiter came and went. In a while the scorching red tide receded and she achieved calm.

“Let’s start over,” Kuryakin suggested. “You were sent here to meet us, right?”

“What did you expect?” She answered his tone rather than his words. “A little man with a beard and a middle-European accent?”

“Let’s just say we anticipated something a bit more subdued.”

“Hide in a corner and people will come to see why you’re hiding. But who’s going to take any notice of us like this? They will stare, yes, but they won’t look. Not with the brain. Now, you have a message to pass on?”

“Not to you.” Solo was prompt and firm. “You’re just another stooge, like Barnett.”

“Don’t you believe it.” Her voice was hard now. “You bulldozed your way past him, but you won’t get by me that easily.”

“Save the dramatics.” Solo grew impatient all at once. “Did you know Mary Chantry?”

“Yes. I knew her. Not well, but well enough.”

“The way she was taken care of? I don’t think so. Look, we know how she died, and where, and when. And why. And who did it. You can play your own stupid little games whichever way you like and it’s none of our business. All we want of you is the chance to meet the man, whoever he is, who put her where she was, so that she bought it. We have a message for him, from her, and we have a few choice words of our own for him. And that’s all. We’ll handle the rest of it ourselves.”

“Just you two!” Her scorn crackled.

“Just us!” Kuryakin put in. “One fool on our side is more dangerous than ten enemies. If you don’t like the terms, you go back to your boss and tell him we have work to do, and we’ll contact him later.”

She didn’t like it, but she had her feelings under icy control, and Solo realized more and more that this female was ten times as potentially dangerous as Miss Thompson. All at once she shed her intensity.

“That’s a tune to dance to,” she declared. “Can you?”

It was obviously a challenge, and a good one. You can tell a lot about a person by the way he or she moves in response to music. Solo got to his feet at once. “I’m no exotic,” he disclaimed, “but I can manage a few basic movements, nothing fancy.”

She came into his arms tense but within three steps all was changed. She could move, and did, like a well oiled dream. When the music died she sighed.

“You’re very good. That’s something, anyway.”

“You’re not exactly lame,” he retorted. “Professional?”

“I was once. You two have me baffled.” She led the way back to the table “I was told you were troublemakers. My job was to pick you up, to dazzle you, analyze you, make you talk, take what you had, and then drop you. But,” she seated herself neatly, “you don’t pick, you don’t dazzle, and I get the awful feeling that if I don’t take care of you, you will go ahead and mix into this thing on your own.”

“Don’t lose any sleep over us,” Kuryakin advised.

“I don’t give a damn about your skin!” she snapped at him. “It’s just that this operation is too damned important to be messed up by a couple of well meaning amateurs.”

“Whereas you’re a professional!” Solo gibed, and she shut her mouth tight for a moment.

“I’ve talked enough,” she said, at last. “I think I will take you to the boss and let him sort you out. Come on. Try and look as if you’ve been picked up for the night.”

“Wouldn’t know how,” Kuryakin murmured. “It’s a new experience for us!” She rewarded him with a glare that was pure blue vitriol. Outside and just around the corner she led them to a sleek and massive automobile, made them get in the back seat, then did something with a switch which opened the windows. Kuryakin frowned.

“Polarized screens,” he estimated. “Curiouser and curiouser.”

“And a topless dress,” Solo murmured. “Somehow I always felt that was a fashion that had to come back. I mean, look at San Francisco!”

“And just listen to that engine.” He raised his voice a trifle. “Is this the Vanden Plas Princess I’ve heard about?”

“Near enough,” she called back over her shoulder. “The only car that isn’t a Rolls, but has a Rolls engine. Nice, isn’t it?”

“Since you’re such a smart Russian,” Solo murmured, “maybe you already know who we’re going to meet?”

“I’m not that smart, Napoleon. In any case I forget just who is the top man at MI6 these days.”

“Oh yeah? One will get you ten it isn’t him, or anybody like him!”

Within twenty minutes the car was murmuring down quiet lanes between venerable old buildings in a part of the city Solo couldn’t identify only as somewhere near the law courts. It sighed to a halt outside an unlit arch. She conducted them across a cobbled yard, up a flight of stone steps into a small hallway, then into a room that was as black as night. There was

heavy carpet underfoot and the pungent scent of a cigar. They touched the edge of a table, then seats. She murmured to them to sit. They heard her feet shush away over the carpet, and then a door sighed and clicked shut. After a second or two Solo managed to distinguish the faint cinder red of a cigar.

“Isn’t this overdoing the cloak and dagger stuff a bit?” he asked.

“Theatrical, isn’t it?” The voice was that of an old man, careful and precise, but far from senile. “Absolutely necessary, however.”

“Why? For dramatic effect, from fear, or just shame?”

“A cheap gibe, Mr. Solo. Any one of a thousand people would pay you well to be told who I am. Or would try to get the information from you by other means, not pleasant ones. I can’t risk that.”

“You prefer to risk other people, like Mary Chantry?”

“Let me squash that error at once!” The old voice grew acid. “I did not send Mary into hazard. Specifically I forbade it. Her task was to observe and report, and nothing else. I do not know how she became involved to the point of death. Do you know?”

“I do.” Solo matched his tone for iciness. “She was observing. She made a mess of it. The man lured her on to his yacht, stole her clothes so she couldn’t run off, had fun with her for a while then had her beaten to death and tossed into the water. All right?”

“That attitude will get you exactly nowhere, Solo!”

“It must be nice,” Kuryakin murmured, “to be able to afford the luxury of hurt feelings. Of course, to do it properly you need an armchair, a secure room, a cigar, and somebody else to do the dying for you.”

“That will do, Mr. Kuryakin!”

“Forget the parade ground bellow, it doesn’t impress.” Kuryakin kept his voice even. “So far as I’m concerned you’re just an old man cowering in the dark, an old man who doesn’t care for the plain truth. If that’s your best you can let us out of here right now.”

“You leave when I say, and not before. And to do what?”

“To find three men,” Solo said promptly. “Possibly a fourth. And we know what to do with them when we find them.”

“You do? You would break the law, Mr. Solo? I doubt the United Network Command would approve of that.”

“You’ve been doing your homework,” Solo approved. “Just by the way, though, we’re on vacation. This is a personal chore. The people who rubbed out Mary Chantry also tried to do the same to a friend of ours.”

“I see. The giant killers!”

“All David had was a sling and a stone,” Kuryakin observed.

“Oh no,” the old voice disagreed. “He was young, divinely inspired, and he had an army at his back, never for get that part. Virtue is an admirable thing, but it cannot stand alone.”

“If you insist on quoting Confucius,” Kuryakin murmured, “you really must try to get him right.” A silence grew, drew out thin, then ended in a dry chuckle. The cigar end brightened a couple of times.

“Shall we try again?” the old voice suggested. “I’m in sympathy with your aims, but I cannot allow you to jeopardize my operations.”

“I’ve heard that before.” Solo grew impatient. “Your operational style leaves me cold. We’ll play this hand our own way. And if you value Captain Barnett at all, you’d better leave him where he is. If he collides with us he is likely to get damaged.”

“As for that overblown trollop you sent out to bring us in,” Kuryakin declared, and grinned to himself in the dark as he heard a stifled gasp, “you can leave her at home too.”

“That overblown trollop, as you called her,” the old man said, “is sitting not three feet away from you at this moment, Mr. Kuryakin.”

“I know. I can smell her. And hear her. Right now, for instance, she has just taken a weapon into her hand, most probably a gun of some kind, presumably aiming it at where she thinks I am. Would you care to bet I can’t take it away from her before she can pull the trigger?”

This time the silence was so tight it rang. Then the old man sighed.

“Very well. Put it away, Nan, we’ll have to try a different tack with this pair. Let me have a moment to think. Believe me, gentlemen, Mary was a mistake that must not be repeated. And my Operation isn’t quite what you seem to think. Perhaps I had better explain that side of it.”

“Is that wise, Charles?” Miss Perrell spoke for the first time.

“I think so, my dear. I don’t think you’ve realized, yet, just who we are entertaining. You’ve heard of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—”

“Oh my God!” she gasped. “U.N.C.L.E. agents. And I called them well meaning amateurs!”

“At any rate we can count on their discretion. You won’t find us in any index, phone book or list, Mr. Solo. We have no name, no official existence, and, in a way, no authority, hut I’ll come to that in a moment. We are

outside the law, a position that has as many drawbacks as it has privileges. You see, those who uphold the law are equally tied by it, have to respect it. And that is why something like seventy percent of all crime in this country goes unpunished. Undetected even. Of course, most of it is petty stuff, but not all. I could recite you a list, a long list, of people who are literally above the law, who can buy and sell anyone who works for wages, who can buy justice, even invisibility. Most of them are known to the forces of law, but they can't be touched. And that is the situation my group strives to correct. As I've said, we have no official standing, nor do we have bosses, levels of authority, rules, a code—nor any system of payment, honors, rewards, nothing like that. You might say we are just an extraordinary assembly of highly individual people trying to do good."

"*Noblesse oblige*?" Kuryakin murmured.

"That's about it. That's what has brought you into it, the belief that you've run into something that ought to be stopped, right? I have that kind of thing reported to me several times a week! My function is to coordinate, to pass the information along to those who can deal with it."

"Like Captain Barnett?"

"Not at all. Roger is just one of thousands. He happens to be in the services. Many are. Many others are not. All are hand picked to be loyal, reliable, observant. They report. That's all. Anything odd and unusual, out of line, suspicious, it comes back to me. That is all they do. Mary was one such. Her reports went to Roger; his reports to me. Of himself he knows nothing else, so can't give anything away. But I have other people, rather special people, who deal with things. That's why I am upset about Mary. It should not have happened. There will be other people to deal with that side of it."

"Permission to kill?" Solo queried, and the old man snorted gently.

"I deal in information. Sometimes, when necessary, I help. I can pull some very long strings. As a rule we operate to whittle the opposition down to the point where the law can step in. Sometimes we are—more drastic than that."

"So what are you offering?"

"Cooperation. Tell me what you know. Pass the message you had from Mary. Give me time to get some positive lines on the people concerned. Keep in touch with Nan here, and as soon as I have it I will pass it on. Well?"

“I’ll make a deal,” Solo said carefully. “We want the people who pulled this particular job. That’s all. It’s personal, nothing to do with the Command this time. You can have the message, and all the data we’ve got.” He took the cassette from his pocket and slid it across the table, went on to explain how it had been garnered. He filled in details of events since, particularly the fracas outside their hotel. “Barnett’s beautiful gopher girl could do with a little probing. And that technique for rounding up juvenile delinquents to order!”

“Yes!” The old man sounded thoughtful. “Damnably easy to do, too. In any shiftless mob it only needs one or two persuasive voices to sway the whole thing. I must say Absalom Green is new to me. Mary was especially interested in the drug business, these infernal psychotoxics and hallucinogens. The yacht will be easy enough to watch, but they’ll be too smart to use it openly.”

“A question,” Kuryakin spoke up. “Your special people— do I take it Miss Perrell is a sample?”

“You may take it so, why?”

“She’s female. So was Mary Chantry.”

“Hah! A dove and a hawk are both birds, but there’s a world of difference between them, you must admit. Very well, gentlemen. Nan will take you away again, and I will be in touch with you as soon as there’s anything to pass on.”

As they followed her out there was something about her footfall that betrayed the mood she was in. In the car she said nothing at all until they were well clear of the rendezvous. Then, pulling into the roadside and canceling the blacked out windows, she half-turned to glare.

“Overblown trollop, eh? Smell, do I?”

“You should be flattered,” Kuryakin said innocently. “You were acting a part. You fooled us completely.”

“I am not acting any part right now,” she said, through very white teeth. “Understand this much. Charles put you in my charge, so you will do as I say. Or you can get out and walk, right now!”

“That’s fair,” Solo approved. “We’ll get out, and you’ll have to go back to Charles and tell him exactly how you lost us. Ready, Illya?”

For one moment he thought she was going to scream; then she drew a deep breath and swiveled forward.

“All right!” she muttered. “Yours today. Where do I drop you?”

Smothering a grin, Solo gave her the address and the car stormed away. In a while Kuryakin sighed and leaned forward.

“What are the terms for a truce, Miss Perrell?”

“Overblown trollop!” she repeated savagely. “Talk about pearls before swine! Overblown!”

“I too was acting a part,” he said placatingly. “That was merely corroborative detail, intended to lend artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative!”

“Good grief!” The car did an involuntary swerve as she twisted her head to stare back at him. “Where did that come from?”

“The words are W. S. Gilbert, but the sentiment is mine. The pearls were appreciated, but it wasn’t the proper time to say so. Not called for.”

“Oh!” Her head went forward again but there was uncertainty in the tone and a slight easing of the stiffness of her neck and chin. “I see!”

“We were thinking of other things,” Solo endorsed. “Not really the right moment to appreciate the finer things of life.”

“Hmmm!” she muttered. “Smart, aren’t you. You made Charles lose his temper, which is something I’ve never seen before, and now you’re trying to con me into making an exhibition of myself.”

“We admire pearls.”

“I’ll bet you do. Look, we’re almost there. You’d better give me a phone number in case I need to reach you.”

Solo gave her the number, noting with appreciation that she made no move to write it down. She gave him one she said was hers, a residence the other side of Norwood.

“I’ll ring you tomorrow,” she promised. “You need to learn a few things about the way we work. I’ll drop you here.”

“Here,” was the same corner where the two had witnessed the murderous assault earlier that same day. Both men felt a tensing of nerves as they got out and started into the dim lit side road. The premonition was accurate. One lone street light left the corners in shadow. From those shadows came lean, black jacketed youths, all unkempt of hair and grin-fling with feral anticipation. They closed in, and the two agents immediately forgot all about Miss Perrell and her moods.

FOUR

THERE WAS no need for words. With the instant cooperation of long experience, both men moved to get the concrete lamp post base at their backs. They were unarmed, because the law in Britain takes a very poor view of guns, but there are other things than official weapons. As Solo eyed the dozen sneering thugs, their ludicrously long and pomaded hair wisping alongside weakly vicious features, he felt a sudden lifting of spirit at the promise of action.

“Name of Solo, I hope,” said one, stepping just a fraction in front of his fellows. “And Kuryakin eh? Wouldn’t want to make another mistake. Missed you this morning.”

“You won’t miss us this time,” Solo promised, scanning the group with a hard eye. “Twelve against two. Makes it awkward!”

To his left there came a click and then the glitter of a six inch knifeblade. Its owner sniggered.

“Going to be more than awkward for you. Going to be dreadful!”

“Not for us.” Solo corrected, talking off the top of his mind while he and Kuryakin eased themselves into the best position for handling. “For you. You see”—he spoke gently, as if lecturing to a class—“if there had been five, say, or six, we’d be able to handle you gently. But with so many, we won’t have the time. We’ll have to get rough. Of course, you’re only youngsters—”

“Stuff that!” The self-appointed leader abandoned his grin. “You talk too much. Save it for the angels, compliments of Mr. Green!”

As he lunged, Solo muttered. “Let’s go, Illya!” and grabbed the lunging wrist, wrenched and twisted, lashed out with a hard driving foot to a knee, let go and whipped a flailing arm up to meet the agonized face that bent down by reflex. Delete one with a shattered kneecap and broken wrist. All in the same movement he spun to meet the lad with the knife, reached for the wrist that held it, yanked it forward and down across his own knee coming up. The knife wielder screamed, the noise snapping off as Solo’s open palm came up all the way from down there under his chin to lift him

bodily into the air. Delete two. Catching a flicker of movement from the corner of his eyes, he reversed his spin, bringing his arm around like a club but with wide open palm. It met the face and cheek-bone of a gaping blond youth, the impact sounding like a pistol-shot. Delete three.

The coldly detached mechanism in Solo's mind counted them off as he came back to a balanced stance and found himself between two attackers, both charging him together. With right and left hand he reached and grabbed hold of two ornate neckties, hauling the pair inwards, together, head to head, solidly. Cancel two more. He grunted as something hard, flexible and massive slammed down across his neck and shoulder, paralyzing his right arm and beating him down almost to his knees. It hurt like the devil, but he surged up and ahead, grappled the weapon wielder with his one good arm and ran him full tilt backward against the solid stone wall. The crunch was solid enough to be convincing.

Just for one breath he stooped to investigate the damaging weapon. A bicycle chain! Then he wheeled, back to the wall, in time to see Kuryakin enjoying himself. Gripping luxuriant locks in either hand, the Russian agent heaved himself backward, brought the two heads together with a very satisfying dull thud.

From the dark came another with a leap, full on to Kuryakin's back. Solo started forward but there was no need. Kuryakin reached back and with both hands, took a f grip of hair and head, then spun and heaved violently. The attacker hung on as long as he could, but at last came free and yelled with fright as he flew through the night air. The flight ended as he met the concrete lamp post, curled around it, hung a moment, then slid limply to the ground. Solo winced as he moved his shoulder, then spared a moment to count up the scattered bodies.

"Eleven—twelve! That's the lot, Illya!" he announced in credulously.

"A pity. I was just beginning to enjoy myself. What—?"

He broke off, and both men whirled tensely as they heard a soft whistle from the roadway. They saw Nan Perrell, sitting at the wheel of her car, but with the door open, watching. She waved them, urgently.

"Thought you'd gone," Solo said, straightening his coat and finger combing his hair. "You saw all that?"

"Blow by blow. Hop in. You need to get away from here, fast!"

Shrugging, the two men climbed in the back and she was gunning her motor before they had the door shut. At a furious pace she took them away,

around several corners and turnings, then found a place to pull in to the side, and stopped. “Stay right there!” she commanded. “This won’t take a minute.”

She strode to a public call box, spent no more than thirty seconds in talk, then returned to the car still urgently and drove off on a winding trail once more until they were safely tucked away in a traffic stream.

“Are we supposed to know what that was all about?” Solo asked.

“Tell me something first. Have you any idea who laid on that little lot for you?”

“One of them was kind enough to say Mr. Absalom Green.”

“Good. I guessed right. Now for what I did. I made a nine nine nine call, to inform the police where to collect some interesting debris.”

“Let’s have the rest of it. Why are we running?”

“It’s very simple. I’ll draw you a diagram. Say some passerby or beat constable finds them, those that are left, then what? Report, alarm, inquiries, knock up everybody all around. You wouldn’t like the publicity at all. And they could, possibly, pin an assault and battery on you. How do you fancy a longish term in clink? Our opponents can buy law, remember.”

“Good thinking,” Kuryakin approved. “Much obliged, but what do we do now, wait until the heat is off?”

“You’ll wait a long time. The coppers will really dig on this one. They’ve had a bellyful of hooliganism just recently. Something else I should ask. Did either of you stop any thing? Any damage?”

Solo hunched his aching hou1der. “One of them dented me with a chain. Quite a weapon. I’ve heard of it, never stopped one before.”

“I could do with some repairs on my coat sleeve—and my arm,” Kuryakin said. “Flick knives are old hat, but still effective.”

“That’s it, then,” she said, decisively. “You can’t go home, and you would be asking for trouble to try any hotel. So I’m taking you home with me.”

“You’re in charge, Miss Perrell,” Kuryakin said softly.

“Now you’re really getting smart, Illya. Truce? Napoleon?”

“Fair enough. But something needs to be done about the leak from Barnett’s office.”

“I’ll mention it to Charles. He’ll fix it.”

“What about you. Aren’t you in danger now?”

“Hardly. Roger doesn’t even know about me. Charles is the only one with that kind of information.”

“Top man. And you’re right next to him. You must be pretty good!”

“I can stand any number of compliments like that,” she laughed. “No false modesty about me, at all. And you two know what it’s all about too, don’t you? Twelve little rockers with toys, and you really smeared them. I don’t think I’ve seen anything quite as fast as that before. Very nice!”

“Thank you,” Solo murmured, and sat back. By his side, Kuryakin seemed uneasy. He leaned forward after a moment or two.

“You saw it all happen. Sat there and watched it, didn’t you?”

“That’s right!” There was suppressed mischief in her voice. “I did. I enjoyed the whole thing.” They were clear of the city traffic now. She eased down, pulled in to the roadside, got out and came to the rear door. “Make room,” she ordered, “so I can sit between you. Explanations are called for.”

They made room and she slid in, settling on the cushions between them.

“I sat there and watched, didn’t I?” she repeated. “I didn’t do anything. And that worries you, doesn’t it?”

“There wasn’t a lot you could do,” Solo shrugged. “We didn’t need any help. Forget it.”

“Stiff necked pair, aren’t you? Look, we’re in this together.” As they started to protest she put up her hand. “All right, I know I’m only a female. Overblown trollop, to you. But I am also, as Charles told you, a hawk. I have weapons.” She extended one long and very shapely leg, made a fast sweeping motion with her right hand, and all at once there was a tiny pistol shaped thing in her fist. Then she opened her palm and let the thing show.

“For you,” she said to Solo. “And here’s its little brother.” She repeated the motion, left handed this time. “For you, Illya. And don’t let the plastic-toy appearance fool you.”

“That’s all right.” Solo eyed the weapon in her palm as an old and tried friend in need. It did, in fact, resemble a toy, simply because there was no need here for pressure resistance and rifled barrel. The bullets themselves did all the work, were miniature rocket missiles that needed only impact to start them on their lethal way. “We’ve seen ‘em before,” he said. “Very useful, and deadly. Thanks for the demonstration. I’m more interested in where you pack them, though.”

“I can’t blame you for that.” She extended her legs happily for inspection. “As I said, no false modesty about me. If you care to strain a

tasteful adjective or two over the limbs, I shan't mind a bit."

They were well worth scrutiny, Solo thought, but his attention returned to the functionally neat harness from which she had extracted the pistols with such practiced ease. At the top of her thigh, where the broad muscle begins to taper inward, leaving a slight hollow below the oncoming hip bulge, a slim buckled band of leather held a flat arrangement of spring clips on a firm leather base. As he looked, she palmed the gun, slapped it into place and restored her skirt hem to semipropriety, all in one movement.

"Neat!" he said with genuine appreciation. "You've practiced that a few times, obviously. But why there?"

"Where else?" she demanded instantly. "A handbag is the first place anybody would go for, so that's out. And skirt hems are getting so elevated these days that nobody would believe there could be anything underneath there except me." She left her skirt where it was, deliberately.

Just as deliberately, Kuryakin juggled the little weapon in his palm, slapped it neatly into its spring clip holder and drew down the hem on his side as far as it would go.

"What d'you do for light entertainment?" he demanded gently. "Throw rocks through the bars at the tigers?"

She gave him a sweetly savage smile. "Do you see any bars here, Illya? And you don't look so tigerish to me!"

"I'm on vacation," he said cryptically. "Can we drive on now?"

She scrambled out, resumed her driving seat, and within ten more minutes they had whipped their way through a slumbering suburb and come to rest in the gravel forecourt of a house standing in its own grounds some distance from the main road. Solo exchanged meaningful glances with his colleague as they followed their leader into the bright lights of a dignified hallway and came face to face with a tall, lean man dressed as a possible butler, but with all the look of a retired sergeant major about him.

"Evening, Curtis," she said blithely. "Would you bring the medical kit up to my room in a moment, please? And some hot water. Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin will be staying, so see if you can conjure up some pajamas, won't you?" She led the way to a handsome staircase and Solo murmured, discreetly:

"Some trollop you picked, Illya."

"A lady tiger, and with a chip on each shoulder. We'll be lucky to get out of this alive!"

The bedroom was obviously hers, but its riotous colors were tame by comparison with the one next door, which she pointed out to them as the place they would sleep.

"Sorry about the decor," she said with a grimace, "but it's part of the image I try to maintain, on the rare times I do entertain guests. For now, both of you, off top gear and sit there, on the side of the bed."

She had assumed all the confident authority of a hospital matron, and the two men obeyed without a murmur. Off came her cape, and, for good measure, off came the negligible upper half of her mesh dress.

"That saves all the nonsense about rolling up sleeves and so forth. I like freedom of action. Besides, it will take your minds off the stings, won't it? Now then!" She came close, just as Curtis appeared with a steaming bowl and a box of medical supplies. The grin left her face as she surveyed the damage. Curtis followed her look, and there was a chill glint in his gray eyes as he asked:

"Just how did you come by that, sir?"

"This? A kid with a bicycle chain."

"I hope you accounted for the murdering young devil, sir?"

"You could say that. I tried to bounce him off a brick wall, but he didn't bounce very well. Just fell down and lay there."

The leathery face twitched. Long arms reached for the shirt and coat Solo had discarded. "I'll see what I can do for the jacket, miss, but I'm afraid the shirt's had it. And you, sir. Let me look." He inspected the three inch gashes in Kuryakin's right arm and clicked his tongue.

"No need to ask about that one. You were very lucky, sir. Do you think we need a doctor, miss?"

"For a scratch like this?" protested Illya.

"That's no scratch," snorted Nan Ferrell. "Nor is that crack you've got, Napoleon. You're damned lucky you didn't crack your collarbone. But we won't call a doctor, because they ask awkward questions and have to make reports and things. Righto, Curtis, see what you can do with the repairs to the clobber, while I patch up the bodies. And the brandy, I think, in about half an hour."

She was competent enough. Solo watched her work on his colleague's arm and winced a time or two at the forthright way she employed her strong and shapely hands. Then he noticed that Illya wasn't wincing at all. When it

came his turn to be doctored, he realized why. She looked rough, almost most casual, but her touch was precise.

“You’re pretty good,” he admitted, as she finally smacked pads over the wounds and tacked them into place with strips of tape. “You look as if you’re hammering dough, but you’re gentle, really.”

“Thank you. I’ve had lessons enough. Whatever I do, I like to do it right. There you are. You’ll live. Now she whirled away to grab at a telephone that stood on the mantelpiece, dialed swiftly and made a gesture. “Move apart so I can sit between you and you’ll be able to listen in. Charles? I’m at home. Napoleon and Illya are with me. No, shut up and hear me out, not fun and games but a little fracas. Mr. Green strikes again.” She told the tale efficiently and without adjectives.

The old man waited until she was done, then simply asked, “Any harm done?”

“Mostly to them. On our side one crocked shoulder, on slit arm, nothing that won’t be cured by tomorrow, I imagine.”

“Good. I think Roger’s office will have to be disinfected. I’ll see to that. Can they hear me?”

“Loud and clear, sir,” Solo said. “If I might suggest, it can’t hurt to put a tail on Miss Thompson, find out who her boss is.”

“That’s one way of getting a lead on Mr. Green, certainly. I’ll have it attended to. In the meanwhile you two had better stick close to Nan and communicate with no one at all. I presume you’re armed?”

“No, sir.” Kuryakin answered for both. “We have instructions against that while we’re in the U.K.”

“That’s not so good. Nan, I’ll lay on a routine jaunt for you in the morning, to get you and those two out of town for a bit, give you the chance to teach them a thing or two.” The click as he hung up was quite audible. She rose, put away the instrument and turned to face them.

“I think I’m going to enjoy lessons with you two. Now, it’s late and we need to be up and about early tomorrow. I’ll bring you a drink each, tuck you in, kiss you good night, and that will be it.”

The pajamas were laid out on each bed. The two men made the change swiftly and in thoughtful silence.

“She has something more than a chip on her shoulder,” Solo said at last, as he slid between the sheets. “Damned if I don’t think she is making an open play for both of us. And she called you a tiger?”

Before Kuryakin could offer comment there came a rap on the door and Miss Perrell came briskly in. She held a tray with bottle and glasses.

“I imagine I look like one of those California waitresses,” she said, putting the tray down. “Say when!”

“If it would have achieved anything I would have said ‘when’ some time ago,” Kuryakin declared. “I also was responsible for the idea of a truce between us, but I didn’t mean to suggest fringe benefits.”

The corner of her mouth came up again as she grinned. “Let me invent a proverb for you,” she said. “Looking at the goods in the shop window doesn’t cost a thing, but if you’re thinking of buying, the price comes high. Very high. Good night now.” With complete aplomb she bestowed a hearty buss on each cheek in turn and marched out.

“I know another proverb,” Solo observed. “When pretty lady lays the kindling in the grate and applies a match, she certainly is not praying for rain!”

“I hesitate to correct an expert, Napoleon, so let’s just say I think you may be wrong. However, I think we can agree that we should discourage such complications.”

“Give her the brush, you mean? That’s not going to be easy, Illya. There was no point in telling friend Charles, but we’re going to need all the help we can get. We have precious little to go on. One yacht, one Absalom Green, one mystery man with a voice like Orson Welles. One reference to Gorchak, whatever that is. Reference to jewels, problem, twenty-five pieces with two more to go. Seventh stone—can you fit seven into twenty-five or twenty-seven, Illya?”

“This is going to take more than mathematics. A man doesn’t kill and order killings unless it’s something big. Even if we are on vacation there’s no reason why one of us can’t call in one afternoon at the office and see what gossip there is. If any.”

“No harm at all.” Solo snuggled down. “But it will have to wait a bit, until the evidence of assault and battery wears off. Meanwhile we both have to be polite—but nothing more—to Miss Perrell.”

“As you say,” Kuryakin sighed, “it’s not going to be easy. I fancy she intends to teach us some tricks, and I hate to think what they might be.”

FIVE

THE MORNING began pleasantly enough, if a trifle earlier than they would have chosen. Miss Perrel1 inspected their injuries, while Curtis returned their clothing almost as good as new, and by the time they all sat down to a tasty break fast there was no echo of the previous evening's strain, apart from a twinge or two. Miss Perrell was the perfect hostess, and they were all highly amused by the newspaper account of "gang-warfare again." In fact, Solo thought, if he could only get used to the lady's habit of wearing dresses that looked as if they had been designed for a stunted twelve year old, he could have enjoyed himself very much.

"I've had my instructions," she told them, "and we're all going for a brisk run down to Folkestone this morning. It will give me a chance to see the place where Mary got it, and where your Mr. Guard lives. You must tell me more about him."

"You'd probably get on with him," Solo suggested. "May be we could call in and see him if he's allowed visitors."

"All right," she said. "Now, the sooner we start the better, as it's a busy road. But you already know that, as you drove down there the day before yesterday, didn't you?"

"We went early. Tip from John to beat the traffic."

"Wise man. I like him already,"

By nine o'clock the A20 had taken them as far as Farmingham, and on her suggestion, they halted long enough to let Kuryakin take the wheel, so that she could sit between them in the front seat.

"Getting to be a habit," she chuckled. "Actually, it's only because I hate talking across somebody and I like to be in the middle of things. While we're on the subject, you two are going to need a car. Be advised, please. Not a hired job. Not a flashy great thing like this, either. I am deliberately conspicuous, as I've told you. But you two should aim at something old, second-hand, inconspicuous."

"Just how do we acquire that?"

“Very simply. I’ll give you the name and address of a little dealer I know, and he will fix you up, no awkward questions asked. Now, tell me about John Guard. Is he as handy as you two at smearing the opposition?”

“I’ll tell you this.” Solo was suddenly very serious. “Johnny used to carry all the gadgetry and gimmicks we all do, but he never liked them. His feeling was that you grow to count on a gun or a minibomb or things like that. Then, after a while, you’re leaning on them like crutches. You get fat and slow. He always preferred to use only his hands, and without any doubt at all he could put me and Illya away for keeps without turning a hair. If he wanted to, that is. But he wouldn’t even move unless he was personally involved.” He watched her profile, saw the breeze stirring pink in her cheek and the butter blonde hair whipping away from her face.

“In a way, it was a handicap to him in U.N.C.L.E. You see , we get our orders, instructions that say so and so is a menace, get rid of him. Or here’s a group that has to be smashed, go and do it. And we do as we’re told. Most of the time, anyway!” he added, as Kuryakin cleared his throat thoughtfully. “Johnny obeyed orders too, but he never liked it. On the other hand, just let him get the conviction that so and so really was a rat, and you wouldn’t stop him with a concrete wall!”

“You obviously admire him,” she said.

“I hadn’t met him before,” Kuryakin offered, “so I can speak from first hand experience this time only. But Green shot him in the chest with both barrels of a shotgun, from no more than two feet. That was about eleven-thirty. We got there just before eight o’clock the next morning and he was still conscious. He hung on simply because he knew we were coming and wanted to be sure we knew all about it. Not because of the shot, but because of Mary.”

“What’s more,” Solo endorsed, “I’ll gamble they’re having a time of it just keeping him in bed while we’re chasing his game. He’s that sort of person. You’ll see.”

“And you think I’m like that?”

“Well,” Solo drawled, “let’s just say you’re not the type that gives up easily. Let’s talk about you, eh?”

“Oh no!” she was prompt and firm. “No you don’t. As I told you last night, I’m willing to put the goods in the window. They are good goods, and I know it. I welcome inspection, any time.”

“But the purchase price comes high.”

“That’s right. You’ll be surprised just how high. In other words I don’t mind you looking. I like it. As they say in the shops, what you don’t see in the window please ask for. We’ll be happy to exhibit our wares. But I keep my soul to myself.”

“And I was just about to ask,” Kuryakin murmured, “what’s a nice girl like you doing in a bloodthirsty racket like this?”

“No comment,” she said flatly. “But I can tell you what we’re going to do when we get to Folkestone. It is, as I said, a routine chore. Every so often we get inside tips. Charles does, I mean. And this is one, to say that a consignment of filth is coming in on the boat we’ll be meeting, from France. Dirty stuff, the addictives. That’s what Mary was watching out for. I have a detailed description of the people carrying the load. My job will be to pass it on to the customs men and observe while they collect. The rest will go through regular channels and won’t concern us, so we’ll have plenty of time to go visiting.”

She took the wheel again for the delicate business of threading a way through the seaside town’s busy streets, rolled to a halt in a parking area alongside the customs shed, and asked the two men to wait a moment while she made herself known to the authorities.

“Can’t make her out,” Solo confessed, scratching his head in the sunshine. “I’ve run into some fancy lines in my time, but hers has me beat. In any case, a dame with her assets doesn’t need a come on line, doesn’t need to do this kind of job at all.”

“Hmm?” Kuryakin was only half-listening; his attention was caught by a magnificent black Rolls that was parked not far from them. “Why is she involved? Ask yourself, Napoleon, with her looks and talents and money—kicks must be pretty hard to come by.”

“Talent?”

“She dances like a professional, as you know. She is a highly competent nurse. She drives extremely well. She is very handy with those pop guns of hers. And she puts up a firstclass impersonation of being one of the idle rich. I would call those talents. There is much more to Miss Perrell than meets the eye.”

“You had me worried for a moment there, Illya. You do notice the ‘meets the eye’ parts, then?”

“Strategic arrangement of adipose tissue can create quite an effective diversion, and she knows it. There she is now!”

Miss Perrell came to stand in the doorway where she had disappeared and waved them to join her. She led them away and into another door, the customs shed.

“They say,” Kuryakin murmured, as they took up a position to one side and away from the check point, “that customs men develop an instinct, which is just another way of saying they are good guessers. But you have a detailed description of the smugglers, Miss Perrell?”

“That’s right. Want to match your intuition against the facts?”

“All right,” Solo agreed readily. “See if we can spot ‘em.” He bent his gaze on the thin straggle of people now coming up the ramp into the shed. Which? That stout and harassed man with the small boy? The elderly dragon with her subdued companion? This newly rich couple with two doll-like little girls? Or that brisk and black suited businessman with his briefcase? Surely not that sloppy young couple so badly in need of discipline about their actions, faces and grooming? Which?

Then came a group to delight his eye. First a small, bustling, pattering woman, as lively as a hummingbird and almost as gaudy. She was twenty years older than beauty but could have been attractive if someone had persuaded her out of the shrieking green of her shapeless dress and a staring orange hair rinse. Piling poor taste on criminal error, she wore a string of enormous red stones about her neck. Genuine rubies that size, he mused, would be worth quite a packet. Striding at her heels came an obvious chauffeur. In his wake came a neutral martyr of a woman all in black, a “companion,” with all the grace and dignity her mistress lacked, and devoting immense care to a double armful of smaller boxes. Next in the line was a truly exquisite male, groomed to perfection, his black hair gleaming, a pencil slim moustache arched over a straining mouth as he struggled with large suitcases.

Then, dawdling along at the end of the line, came the mother’s daughter, a girl of no more than twenty, the likeness to the gaudy dame unmistakable but enhanced by the full blush of insolent youth. For all her boredom, the only adjective appropriate for her was “luscious.” Solo stared, felt warm all over, and stared more, absorbing her from red gold mane to tiny toes. The in between of her was draped in a dress as brief as Miss Perrell’s but paper white and pin pleated from neck to hem. He drew a deep and careful breath and reflected that he was looking at an unexploded bomb. Illya could say

what he liked, but that was no camouflage. That was the real thing. The idea started another one. He whispered an aside to Miss Perrell.

“You were talking about dazzle to distract the eye,” he reminded her. “On that basis, there are your smugglers.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong if you tried,” she retorted, then put up a hand to pat her hair and make a covert gesture of pointing. Solo frowned as he saw the officials brisk up, dismiss the musical comedy group with a wave and then close in on two people he would never have given a second look. That red faced beery man and the skinny drab women with the lines of age and the mouth of a nagging drudge—were smugglers? Miss Perrell made a move, and they followed her outside into the sunshine.

“Fancy picking on Maggie!” she chuckled.

“Maggie?”

“Margaret, Lady Herriott, Countess of Danby, and entourage. Brinkley, her chauffeur. Maid companion Augustine. Secretary—and thinly disguised gigolo—Monty Hagen. Daughter Evadne. Like to meet them? It will be an education for you.” She marched them across to where the eccentric group had gathered around the shiny black Rolls and greeted them as old friends.

“Hello, Maggie. Vad. You look disgustingly healthy and brown, the pair of you. Meet a couple of friends of mine. This is Napoleon, and this one’s Illya.”

The luscious red head opened her emerald green eyes wide on the two men, her boredom fading away as she took them in. “Very healthy,” she murmured, to no one in particular. “Very nice.” She drifted close, gazing up. Lady Herriott ran around in a small circle and came back to her starting spot, sighed and complained.

“Isn’t it hot? Hot everywhere. You know, we decided to have three days on the Isle of Levant. You know, where everyone goes nude. But it was just as hot there.” She shook her head as if puzzled by that, then beamed at Miss Perrell. “You’re looking as delicious as ever, Nan. I don’t know how you do it.?’ Turning aimlessly she brushed her daughter gently aside and took Solo’s hand as if seeking stability in an uncertain world. “There—I’ve forgotten your name already!”

“You try to do too much,” Miss Perrell put in. “You really ought to take life a little easier, you know.”

“Oh, but I like to do whatever I can while I can. So long as it’s legal, of course.”

“That’s very commendable,” Solo murmured. “Rather unfashionable, too, these days.”

“Isn’t it dreadful?” she agreed. “I mean, once the law goes where are you? What I say is, keep to the law and you need never worry about being virtuous. That will take care of itself.” She patted his hand approvingly and trotted away to supervise baggage loading operations. Evadne surged in close again, seemed to trip and would have fallen had it not been for Kuryakin’s quick and strong arm.

“My!” she breathed, leaning on him and almost purring. “You’re very strong, aren’t you?”

“Strong enough. You didn’t like Levant then?”

“Dull! Unutterably tedious. I mean, everybody looks the same in the raw, don’t they? There’s no scope left. I’d rather have a good old orgy any time.”

“An orgy?” Kuryakin repeated, raising his brows at Solo. Lady Herriott came trotting back in time to hear his words and smiled.

“We have marvelous orgies regularly. Only for the right people, of course.” Her smile gave way to a calculating stare as she eyed Solo and then Kuryakin. “Of course, if you’re friends of Nan, you’re bound to be all right. Are they, Nan?”

“I really don’t know.” Miss Perrell seemed to be struggling with inner amusement, probably at the expression on Kuryakin’s face. “I can find out and let you know. Will that do?”

“Splendid! Tomorrow night, then? And why don’t you come along too, just for once?”

“You’ll never persuade Nan,” Evadne exclaimed, with edges on her voice. “She has her own diversions. But you’ll come, won’t you, both of you? Please?”

Solo shrugged, not knowing what it was all about, and looked to Miss Perrell for a lead. She had a gleam in her eye.

“I’ll see about it. I may bring them myself, yet. I’ll let you know what I decide.”

As the gleaming Rolls crackled away over gravel and then into the road, Solo turned to her. “What was all that about an orgy?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute, soon’s I see what kind of fish I’ve caught. Get in the car, I’ll be back in a minute.” She went away swiftly.

“What d’you think, Illya?”

“I think it’s time we got out from under, Napoleon. We have things to do more important than attending society gambols.”

Miss Perrell returned to the ear, slid in behind the wheel, and started up the engine, but there was a faraway look in her eyes as she said:

“Guard’s place is along the coast road on the way to Hythe, isn’t it?”

“Right,” Solo told her. Then, after they had been rolling awhile, “What’s on your mind?”

“Am I that obvious?” She laughed harshly and flicked a glance at the two men by her side. “All right, try this on your experienced minds. I have just caught two hundred thousand pounds’ worth of heroin and assorted hard drugs, on a tipoff. Good, yes? But wait a bit. That’s the eleventh tipoff in two years. Always accurate, always the same type of people, and always the same story. That couple will go through the mill, and the answer will be —nil! No leads, commercial connections, contacts, distribution network, nothing! It’s crazy. They will swear they don’t know a thing.”

“Maybe the stuff has been planted on them for some body else to grab?”

“We’ve thought of that. We’ve had other people shadowed, followed. Same answer. Nothing. Somebody has just lost two hundred thousand pounds’ worth of dope, and we have no idea who, nor where it was going. Mad!”

“Always on that same boat?” Kuryakin demanded, and she frowned.

“Now you come to mention it, yes. But that’s just a coincidence, I’m sure. Maggie travels on the Continent regularly, for her charity work.”

“Charity?” Solo demanded. “Pardon me, but the countess struck me as being far removed from anything as real as that.”

“She’s real enough.” Miss Perrell began to grin. “I’ve known her for years, and she is absolutely genuine. Charity!” She laughed softly to herself, and Solo realized all over again just how attractive she could be.

“Let us in on the joke,” he said.

“All right, Maggie—she used to be Margaret Wallace, daughter of a fairly well off family, bitten with the stage bug very early, had something of a career, then married Danby—all strictly story book stuff up to that point. But she was also bitten by the goodwill bug after seeing the seamier side of life. And she is, as she said, completely without any sense of propriety. For Maggie, so long as there’s no law against it, it goes. She hit on her orgy notion, oh, a long time ago now. And they are orgies, literally. Bacchanalia

in the Nero Roman style. Once a month at Danby Hall, and no holds barred. Everything goes. Everything!”

“But isn’t that breaking half a dozen laws?”

“No, Illya, not at all. Maggie is very careful who she picks. Only the best people. Rich people. People with status, reputation, fame and renown. Quite clever people, too, mostly.”

“How does that make it legal?”

“It doesn’t, in itself, but so long as the affair takes place on private property, and the people are there by invitation only, and no one complains, the law cannot intervene. The only other way anyone can interfere is by moral protest, and there would be plenty to do that, but their guns are very neatly spiked. Because, you see, she really is operating a charity. Every guest is expected to contribute a substantial sum—and they all do—which then goes to famine relief. And it does, every last penny. That has been checked a score of times, and it is quite genuine.”

“Very neat,” Solo approved.

“It is. You see, the ‘holier than thou’ brigade can’t say a word. And, so I’m told, everybody has enormous fun. Including Maggie herself. When you come to think of it, the kind of people she invites seldom have such an opportunity to let their hair down and relax.”

“You’re speaking from hearsay,” Kuryakin pointed out. “You’ve never been to one of these Roman scandals?”

“I have other things to do.” She snapped the words off sharp, then. “What did you think of her rubies?”

“Those hideous red beads were rubies?”

“They were,” Miss Perrell said carefully, “either the genuine Danby rubies, which are something like five hundred years old and famous, even if they are hideous—or a replica—or a replica.”

“Why the echo?” Kuryakin wondered, and she laughed again.

“Because, as you saw, Maggie has no taste at all, no color sense, but she adores those rubies. And they are immensely valuable, as antiques. And she likes to wear them whenever possible. So a long time ago now, she had them copied, twice, so perfectly that even she can’t tell the real from the copy. At least, that’s the story. And she switches them at random. So, if you were a jewel thief, would you care to try to snatch them, in those circumstances?”

“She sounds quite a girl,” Solo chuckled. “That orgy might be fun after all.” Before she could comment, he put a hand on her wrist. “Johnny’s place is just around the next corner, left hand side.”

As the car slowed to a stop, Solo got an idea. “Look,” he suggested, “it’s still a mess in there. You drop Illya and me here, while you go on to the hospital, see Guard and tell him how things are moving. By the time you get back we’ll have the place tidy enough for visitors, maybe a meal if we can find the ingredients for it. You can find this place easily enough on the way back.”

They watched the car glide away then went indoors to dried blood and silence, to find mops and buckets, to use hot water and muscle and clean the place up fit to be seen. And all the while a strange idea circulated in Solo’s mind. Stones. Here the beach was full of them. Some on the window ledge. Red stones in a necklace. And the crystal jewels the greasy voiced man had spoken of, on that tape, were stones too. Solo felt certain of that. But why the “seventh stone”?

SIX

MISS PERRELL came back with a strange glow in her eye. “I saw him, talked to him,” she told them. “The doctor was very kind and understanding, spoke to me privately after wards. Apparently Mr. Guard will be on his feet again in a week, would be up and about now if they would let him. He really is a fantastic man. So quiet and gentle, and yet you get the impression he would charge straight through a brick wall if it got in his way. He said he wished he had been there when you had your little mixup with the thugs,”

“That sounds like him,” Solo grinned. “What do you fancy for lunch? There’s a fair stock of supplies, and Illya is a fine short order cook.”

She wasn’t very interested in food. Instead, she made Solo show her exactly where and how they had found Guard and what they had done.

“It’s hard to imagine,” she said, “now that you’ve cleaned it all up. Stone floors don’t leave traces. I shall have to get Charles to let me hear that tape for myself.”

“I wouldn’t,” Solo advised. “It’s not nice, nor necessary for what you’d learn from it. We’ve told you all the bits that matter.”

“Will you stop trying to protect me?” She eyed the room, then looked out of the window. “Do you suppose we could find the actual place on the beach where she died?”

“We can try. Johnny described it fairly well.”

“Please,” she said, and Solo exchanged resigned glances with Kuryakin. They went out of the beach side door onto a small platform and then down a flight of wooden steps to the narrow concrete strip which ended just a yard beyond the house. She paused a moment to take in the scene, the headlands on either side, the sea, which was far out now.

“Your man certainly likes to be isolated,” she said, as they started to walk. “I gathered he was that type, just talking to him. We are all isolated, of course, from each other, but very few of us dare to face that fact. And don’t quote Donne at me!”

“No man is an Island—why not?”

“Donne was talking in terms of responsibility. We have to feel some kind of responsibility for each other, or civilization would perish. But we are in fact, each one of us, isolated from the other. Napoleon, do you think I am morbid, actually wanting to see the very spot where Mary died?”

“Let’s just say I don’t see how it will do any good.”

“But it will. It will help to keep me aware of the hard facts of life. I have to keep reminding myself that this isn’t just a game, that people do get killed, and that it could be my turn any time I get careless.”

“It’s a point,” he agreed, then halted to raise an arm. “I think that must be it. A hollow in the pebbles where he crouched to watch, and there’s the water line at high tide.”

Solo had to admit, if only to himself, that there was an unreal sense about this business. Here, with a breeze gently tugging at her little girl dress, the bright sunshine striking highlights from her pale blonde hair, it was hard to imagine that Miss Perrell was standing, then crouching, at the very spot where one of her colleagues had coughed up blood and died an inglorious death. Still harder was it to believe that John Guard, involved purely by chance, had been immediately attacked and left for dead. That kind of thing didn’t fit this beach, the quiet sunshine. Miss Perrell stood up, looked out to sea, then turned and came back to him.

“That will do it,” she said. “Let’s go back.”

They went up the slope to the concrete wall, and she scrambled up, disdaining his help, then stood and looked down at him.

“Wait a bit,” she said, and he waited. The breeze tweaked at her skirt, so that he saw for a moment the glitter of the buckle on her thigh strapped holsters. “I want some stones,” she said, “About so big,” and she indicated with a finger and thumb something the size of a tennis ball. “I think about ten or twelve. Pass them up.”

He shrugged, gathered up stones for her until she was satisfied, then climbed up to join her, took some of them. They started walking back to the steps.

“Aren’t you going to ask why?”

“You’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

“That I will. You’ll see.”

They halted at the foot of the steps. She moved to the upward edge of the concrete and arranged the stones in a row, about six inches apart, right on the edge.

“Let’s go and eat now,” she suggested, and led the way lip the steps. Music met their ears as they went inside.

“What on earth—?“she tilted her head to listen to the cascade of interwoven sound. “I’m sure I know that, but not in that form.”

“Bach,” Kuryakin explained.

“But that’s keyboard music. Heavens, I used to play this thing once. They are ringing it!”

“Haven’t you ever heard the Swingle Singers?”

She hadn’t and was most intrigued. All through the meal she and Kuryakin talked music, and Solo got the impression that she was rather put out by the depth and range of the Russian agent’s knowledge.

She’s obviously interested in music, he thought, *but Illya’s making her sound like a stumbling amateur, and she doesn’t like it a bit*. Guard had four Swingle albums in his record collection, and by the time they had been played Miss Perrell had had enough.

“Leave the washing up a moment,” she said, pushing away from the table. They followed her out on to the little balcony. She indicated the stones; then with a smooth movement she drew one of her guns.

“Target practice,” Kuryakin guessed. “You’re not giving yourself much of a mark to shoot at, are you?”

“You two said you’d seen weapons like these before, but have you used them at all? Care to show me?” She offered one gun to Solo, who put up his hands in rejection.

“I’m no expert. I’ve handled one, yes.”[1]

Miss Perrell sat on the top step, braced her forearm on a knee, took careful aim, and fired. There was a quiet pop and then the delayed whip crack sound far ahead of the muzzle. Down there a chip of concrete sprang away in dust by the side of the center stone, close enough to stir it.

On her second shot it leaped away into the sunshine with a howl. She opened her palm and handed the gun to Solo.

“Let’s see you,” she said. He took it, shrugged as he examined it.

“I said I’m no expert, and this thing isn’t intended to be accurate. The slugs are miniature rockets, which throws the customary trajectory all cockeyed. For one thing, they take off slow but accelerate past the sound barrier within the first few feet. The real virtue of the thing is the hitting power. As you know, the impact value derives from half the mass times the

square of the velocity, so there's quite a clout at the far end. Still, if you insist!"

Kuryakin, elbowed on the balcony to one side, hid his grin. He knew what was going to happen next. Solo wrapped his hand around the weapon gently, gazed at the patient row of stones, and took seemingly casual aim. The gun spoke softly but fast—six snap cracks of sound—and from the end of the line six stones sprang smartly into the air, spraying dust.

"Not bad at all," he said, handing it back to her, "once you get the hang of it."

He thought he had never seen before such naked hate as was in her eyes at that moment. She took the gun and smacked it into its place.

"Don't I get a try?" Kuryakin complained, and she wheeled on him.

"All right, so you're both pretty smart with guns. But there are other things. Come on inside!" She led the way with hard angry steps. The two men shook their heads at each other and followed. She seized the table, sent it rolling away from the center of the room with a vigorous shove, then turned on Kuryakin again.

"Your turn," she said, "and this time we'll see how good you are with no weapons at all." She put fingers over her head to a button or two, grasped her hem and hoisted, took the dress up over her head and off.

"Goods in the window," Solo murmured, moving to the table and hitching his hip on it.

"You said one tends to lean on gadgets, to get fat and slow." She peeled off the holsters, laid them on the table, then stared at him. "Fat and slow?"

"I was quoting John Guard," Solo defended. "And he had a point, but it didn't refer to you. Just what are you trying to prove?"

"That I am not the weak and defenseless female you think I am." She wheeled away, trod to the center of the room and faced Kuryakin. She kicked off her sandals and now was wearing only a sheer body clinging garment of some kind in black cobwebby stuff. It left absolutely nothing to the imagination. He saw her chin come up and out as she challenged his colleague, and seeing the pair of them like this he realized there was very little difference between them in height, weight or reach. The difference was entirely in the arrangement of adipose tissue.

"You can have me," she said flatly. "All you have to do is come and get me—if you can!"

Illya was wary. "Suppose I don't want you?"

“Then I am going to get you. I mean it!”

“You’re a fool. This is a stone floor. You’ll get hurt.”

“Save the excuses for when you need them.” She crouched and spread her arms in readiness. Kuryakin sighed, unbuttoned his coat and half-turned to shrug it off. She sprang instantly, one arm flashing up and down in a neck chop that should have finished him there and then, except that he rolled with it and away from it and came up as far as one knee with the coat off and clear.

“Lesson one,” she said. “Don’t be careless.”

“Thank you,” he said, flexing his neck carefully.

She came in fast then, darting out a hand. He reached past it with seeming ease and clamped on her wrist. She whirled and ducked, twisted, coming in to get his arm over her shoulder, ready to throw him away. Only it didn’t happen like that. Before she could heave he had brought his arm across and under her chin, together with her wrist. Then she heaved. And grunted. And heaved again. Illya merely stood there and let her use up her strength. After a few fruitless moments of that he lifted his unused left hand, chopped her smartly in the ribs, and shook off her grip on his right hand. Then he slapped that hand smartly between her shoulder blades and sent her reeling to her knees. She was up again in a flash.

“Care to try that again?” he asked mildly, and offered his right arm.

She snarled, flung at his offer, grabbed, went past and around him, bringing her other arm under and around and over and clasped both hands behind his head in a classic full nelson.

“What do you say now?” she hissed.

“You want a speech?” He raised one hand to touch her elbow and she clamped on more pressure savagely. He sighed, shifted his feet just a fraction, then squirmed suddenly, snapping his arm down hard, smashing his elbow into her midriff powerfully. He turned to watch her double up and whoop for breath, clutching her stomach. Then he put both hands on her shoulders, pushed, and sat down hard on the stone floor. The thud brought a grunt from her. She went to rise instantly, and he sat her down again, hard. Solo winced, watched her try again and go down again, wallop! She shook the hair from her face and glared at Illya.

“Let me get up!”

“So that you can make an even bigger fool of yourself? All right.” He stood back. She tucked long legs under, crouched, came up with a rush, her

left hand flailing across in a chop at his jugular, right hand stabbing stiff fingers for his solar plexus. Her chop met his forearm and skidded harmlessly, her dig was foiled by his down cutting palm. He spun, extending a toe to sweep her feet out from under, and again she sat, this time with such force that she was momentarily stunned by the impact. Now there were tears in her eyes, but she gathered her long legs for another try.

"Your head is almost as hard as this floor," he observed, then tensed as his alert eye caught the twinkle from a slim knife she had plucked from somewhere.

"Damn you!" she choked, coming in. He went straight to meet her, to get inside the point, hit her hard in the ribs, grabbed the dangerous wrist and twisted. Still in the same forward impetus he jarred into her with a shoulder, snaked his free arm around and up and got a good handful of her hair. Then he bent her back over his knee.

"Now," he said, very quietly, "drop it or I'll break your arm." She panted violently but let the blade go. Still holding her bent, he stared into her tear filled eyes.

"You're a fool," he told her. "A dangerous fool. Some amateur has been giving you lessons."

"A karate black belt?" she choked.

"An amateur, just the same. At fighting. He taught you some tricks, in some gymnasium or other. He didn't teach you the most important thing of all, which is to estimate the enemy accurately. You chose me. You made your mistake right there. Napoleon is more civilized than I am."

"Do I have to listen to this lecture?"

"Yes, or be partly bald for the rest of your life. Which won't be a long one if you persist in giving warnings. That's a silly thing to do. In a game it's right to give warnings, to play by the rules, even to lose your temper. But not in fighting. In a game, you win or lose. In fighting, you win or you're dead." He released her and stood away. She came upright panting hugely, stretching the flimsy suit she wore. Then, quick as a flash, she turned to the table, to grab at her guns. But they were now in Solo's care.

"You don't want to do that," he told her gently. "What good would it do you? For one thing, you'd have to explain to Charles." He waited a moment, then replaced the two weapons in the thigh belts and pushed them over the table to her. "Here. Take them. Use them on the enemy some time."

“A moment.” Kuryakin came to stand by her shoulder. “Get that cat suit off, first.”

“What?” She stiffened, and Solo could have sworn he saw fear in her face. “What for?”

“There’s a bathroom in there. Off you go. Run a hot bath and have a thorough soak. You’ll be as stiff as a board to morrow if you don’t.” He reached for her dress, handed it to her. “Go on!” She went.

“That was murder,” Solo murmured. “The perfect squelch. And she could be damned good, too.”

“She is good,” Kuryakin retorted. “She almost had me with that knife. Where did it come from?”

“Search me. I didn’t see it until she was holding it out.”

“I don’t suppose she would tell us if we asked. The trouble is”—Kuryakin took up his discarded apron thought fully—“she was trying to show off. If it had been some thing serious, an enemy, she would have reacted in a different way entirely. Here, you dry while I wash.”

The chores had been done and coffee was bubbling by the time she came back, looking very humble.

“I don’t like to say this,” she said, “but I must. I have to thank you two for opening my eyes today. I must seem pretty dreadful to you, all brag and blow!” She looked around. “And you’ve washed up. I feel utterly useless.”

“Don’t be silly,” Solo told her. “We had all the advantages. Here, have a cup of coffee and relax awhile, or should we be getting back?”

“We’ve a minute or two yet.” She carried her cup over to the window to look out, and then down at the row of carvings. She studied them a moment, then took one up in her hand. “I noticed these before. They’re beautiful things. I’ve never seen anything quite like them.” Solo went and she showed him the one she held. “Look at this. It looks like nothing at all in particular, if you just look at it, but doesn’t it make you think of a frog?”

“It has that feel, what Picasso would call ‘essence of form,’ I’d say. And this one is a seal, isn’t it. And that a tiger.”

“Do you know about these? Where they come from, I mean.”

“I know that much, yes. Out there. You were shooting at some, just now. Picked up from the beach.”

“Surely not. These have been carved!”

“That’s right. John Guard’s work. His hobby, I mean.”

She put down the frog shape and sighed. “You’re really putting me down, aren’t you? Flattening me with all the skills and talents I can appreciate and understand. I think we had better go home.”

The drive back to London was a silent and steady one. It was late afternoon before she halted for them outside their pseudo-hotel and let them dismount.

“You know the number if you have any orders or information for us later,” Solo said.

“I’m not likely to have much of either,” she muttered. “Not for you two. Not for a bit, anyway.”

They went into the room they shared and shut the door carefully. They had achieved their objective, but neither of them felt happy about it. Kuryakin prowled the room restlessly. The phone buzzed and Solo grabbed at it. Even if it was a job call he would welcome it, rather than this waiting. The switchboard girl told him, “We have a lady on the phone, asking for you, Mr. Solo.”

“All right.” Solo made a gesture for Kuryakin to get on the extension. “Go ahead, put her on.”

A very familiar coo met his ear. “Mr. Solo?”

“That’s Miss Thompson, isn’t it?” Solo felt a delicate cold chill touch the back of his neck. “What does Captain Barnett want now?”

“Fancy you recognizing my voice! But it’s nothing to do with him. It’s me. I can do something for you.”

“I can’t imagine what.”

“Let us not play games, Mr. Solo. I don’t know what it was you said to Captain Barnett, but you really got him in a flap. He sent me home yesterday, early, and told me I was on indefinite leave, until further orders!”

“Sorry about that. I seem to have got you into trouble.”

“Oh, that’s all right.” She made a tinkling laugh. “I’m not likely to say no to a spot of leave. But you’re in trouble. Whatever it was you said—and I think I know—you won’t get away with it, you know. The service is very hot on that kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing?”

“Well, I don’t think it’s something I should mention on the phone, but if you could come and see me tonight, both of you, I think I can show you a way out so that nobody gets hurt.”

Solo raised his brows and grinned at Kuryakin. Covering the mouthpiece, he said, “Do you get the same smell I do?”

“Walk into my parlor. Ask her how to get there.” Solo relayed the query, and she gave them detailed instructions.

“I shall expect you about nine,” she said blithely.

“We’ll be there,” Solo promised, and hung up. “By rights,” he murmured, “we ought to inform our Miss Perrell.”

“That’s right. But we’re not going to, are we? I mean, she might get hurt again!”

SEVEN

IT WAS a minute or two short of nine as they began climbing the shallow stone steps toward a row of very secluded villas. The whole area was upper class suburbia, and Solo frowned as they reached the top and struck a private road.

“Mr. Green must pay well,” he said. “This area must come a bit high for a Wren’s salary.”

Kuryakin sniffed the rich odor of growing things, brushed the hedge that hid the villa gardens with his fingertips. “She may well be worth it, Napoleon, where she’s placed. I imagine smugglers would give a lot to know just where the navy is at any given time.”

“I was thinking along those same lines, Illya. Only Charles assured us, and so did Barnett, that this business wasn’t connected with service matters. And if the stuff is coming in by cross channel ferry, the way we saw this morning—oh, I don’t know, the more I think about this the more mixed up I get.”

“This is it.” Kuryakin halted by a gate which bore a rough wood panel painted in Gothic script, THE NEST. Solo caught a glimpse of light colored polish off to one side and hissed at his companion to follow as he crossed the grass to look. There, in the driveway, stood a car. They studied it carefully and with growing excitement.

“Well now,” Solo murmured. “Either Miss Thompson can also afford to run a nice new Jag, or she has company.”

“Maybe it’s Mr. Green himself!” Kuryakin said, like one looking forward to a treat. “Or even the big cheese. That would be nice. Shall we go and see?” They returned to the door and pushed the illuminated bell button. A light came on beyond the half-glass door.

“You’re punctual,” cooed Miss Thompson, opening the door wide. “Just go straight in through that curtain.”

Brushing the curtain aside had all the feel of tackling a short fuse bomb, but there was nothing explosive beyond, just a room. A lot of money had been spent on carpets, furnishings and decor but with little regard for taste.

Solo eyed the geometric abstracts on the walls and the weird wire sculpture that mocked him from every ledge and made a face. Kuryakin sighed but kept his face straight. Over to their right was a massive couch. On the left to match it was a sideboard bearing a generous selection of bottles and glasses. Directly ahead, a door stood half-open, yielding a view of the kitchen. She brushed past them and turned.

"Make yourselves at home," she invited. "Just sit any where. I'm making coffee. Won't be a moment."

"You're very kind," Solo breathed, watched her disappear into the kitchen and then looked at his companion. "Did you see what I saw?"

"I think so. We seem to be destined to run into women with one idea in mind. I would say she was wearing even less than Miss Perrell!"

"And what will you bet she's playing the same cards, for the same reasons?"

"Dazzle and distract, and then—pow!" Kuryakin made a chopping gesture, and Solo grinned.

"Only, this time, somebody else will do the pow part." He lowered his voice to a barely audible murmur. "In the right hand wall, past the couch, is a door that could be a bed room. It'll bear watching."

There was no time for more. Miss Thompson came back with a tray. "You must sit somewhere," she reproved them.

"Sorry," Solo said, and they both chose chairs which gave a view of that crucial door, Kuryakin reaching to slide a low table into place for the tray. She lowered it carefully, then stood up, deliberately giving them ample opportunity to observe her before sitting herself on the couch. She was wearing a transparent housecoat, decorated all over with Chinese dragons in gilt thread and leaving no doubt whatever that there was only her pink skinned self underneath. She smiled in complete self-assurance and began to pour.

"I suppose you're wondering what this is all about!"

"We're curious, yes."

"Well, let me be quite frank. No point in beating about the bush, is there? I know quite a bit about you two boys. And Mr. Guard. You're on the wrong side of the law, aren't you? No, don't interrupt just yet, let me tell you. I know a lot more than you think. You see, I'm not just Roger Barnett's secretary. That's the obvious thing. My real job is to keep an eye on him and on anyone who comes to see him. All sorts of wicked people would

give a lot to know what he knows, where every ship and group and squadron is at any time. So I have to keep a sharp eye on anyone who calls."

"Like us," Kuryakin agreed. "You checked back. What did you find?"

"Quite a lot. Not all by myself, of course, but I have contacts. You upset Roger badly by showing him that girl's picture. By blackmailing him, that was obvious. But it wasn't until we traced you two back to John Guard that the picture began to shape up."

"What picture?"

"Now, now, Mr. Kuryakin." She smiled archly. "Let's not play innocent, shall we? I'm sure you've heard of U.N.C.L.E.?"

"Oh. Yes, I've heard."

"Well, John Guard used to belong to that, but he was discharged some time ago. Tossed out in disgrace. And he is now working for the other side, for the criminal element."

"He is?"

"You know very well!" Her coo went up a tone or two. "Why do you suppose he has that isolated house on the coast? And why did he send you two with his dirty work, instead of coming himself? Because he can't afford to leave his lookout post, and he daren't risk being recognized. I've told you, I have my ways of finding out things."

"Just what are you, anyway, Miss Thompson?"

"Naval intelligence, of course," she told him, then smiled and shared the smile with Solo. "I'm only a small cog, of course. Nothing important. And there's no need to worry, really. I mean, we can be friends. You can trust me all the way."

"Wait. Whoa! I'm a little confused just here." Solo put down his cup and sat forward. "You're saying that we are known to be associated with John Guard in some crooked deal or other, but it's all right with you? And with naval intelligence? Excuse me, Miss Thompson, but I don't get it."

"Oh dear, must we be so formal? Call me Louise. You're Napoleon and Illya, right? Of course we can be friends, if you're willing to come in with us. It was a mistake to upset Roger. I mean, he can really set the big wheels turning, make a stink. And that would never do. But there are other jobs."

"I think, Napoleon, the lady is offering us the chance to become double agents. To keep in with the baddies, but turn over our information to the goodies, to her. Louise?"

“That’s right!” she gave them a dazzling smile and sat up briskly. “Of course, you’ll have to tell me what it is you have on Roger, so that you won’t be able to use that again, but that’s all. And then you’ll be with us, on our side. You see?”

Solo could see far more than she imagined. Her inadequate robe, which had only been loosely gathered around her in the first place, was now gaping invitingly. But now his mind was too full of other things.

“Surely you don’t have the authority to make a deal like that on your own? You said you were just a small cog.”

“That’s so. I just observe and pass information along.”

“You’ve met your chief, though, haven’t you?”

“Naturally. He comes here to see me from time to time. And he pays me, of course. Let’s not be so naive as to think I can afford to live like this on my service screw.” She leaned back in a deliberate pose against the cushions. “You see, there are benefits to it, if you want to be sensible.”

“I think we understand,” Solo declared, feeling suddenly sorry for this gorgeous moron and hating the people who were using her. “Don’t we, Illya? I believe we could even give a description of your chief.”

“Oh yes.” Kuryakin sat up a little straighter, loosened him self ready for action. “We can tell you a thing or two, Louise. You are not intelligence, naval or otherwise. You’re either very stupid or a good liar.”

She came bolt upright, her face a mask of astonishment.

“You are being used,” Solo told her, not unkindly. “The man you pass your reports to is a killer. You reported to him as soon as we left your office yesterday. Two men got out of a taxi just outside our hotel a short while later. Two men who, by chance, happened to look like us. They were jumped, beaten up, put in the hospital. Meant for us. He tried the same trick late last night, caught us coming home from a club. Pack of young hooligans set on us. They were unlucky. That’s twice. I think he is all set to try a third time. I think he can hear every word I’m saying, right now.”

She got up, her face white, her beautiful breast stormy with agitation as she stared down at the two men. “You must be mistaken. You must be!”

“I think not. I’ll name him for you.” Solo fixed his eyes on that enigmatic door. “Come out and show yourself, Mr. Absalom Green!”

“How did you know?” she gasped. Both men ignored her, kept their attention on that door. It didn’t move. Instead a cold and crisp voice came from the direction of the kitchen.

“Don’t move, gentlemen. You’re quite clever but not clever enough. Do not do anything sudden. I have a nervous finger.”

Solo turned carefully, to see Green standing in the kitchen doorway, a pistol in his right hand. The muzzle was rock steady, the barrel sawn off short.

“It’s a modified shotgun, Mr. Solo. Made to my own order and very efficient. I’m sure you will appreciate that I am in no mood to trust anyone else’s weapons these days.”

“You didn’t do very well with John Guard, did you?”

“I allow myself one mistake, Mr. Solo. So far I have never made the same mistake twice.”

“You can’t count,” Kuryakin told him. “Your schoolboy warriors had two tries and failed both.”

“*They* failed.” Green’s voice crackled with fury. “They have paid the price. I shall not fail.” He took two careful steps forward. At his back showed a big, burly figure who slid by and moved away to one side. Then another, and then a third. Solo watched them, reflecting that they must have been stacked on top of each other in that tiny room. They were big men, coarse featured, roughly dressed in that curious badly bundled fashion that marks the seafaring man ashore. Miss Thompson came out of her shock and moved just a little. Green flashed her a glance like a rapier.

“Sit down and keep quiet!”

“Well, really!” she complained, but sat heavily on the couch just the same. Green shifted his attention back to his prey.

“You warned Barnett that he was being spied on, didn’t you? That she was working for me? How did you know that?”

“Elementary. Your juvenile hooligans talk too much.”

“I see. Now tell me what message you carried to him from John Guard, and why, and what Guard has to do with this and with Barnett.”

“Sorry,” Solo murmured “Sudden attack of amnesia.”

“Indeed!” Green flicked a glance around at his henchman. “Flanagan! No, Ponti, you’re nearer. Make her scream, would you?”

“*Si*. A pleasure.” The man addressed showed vivid white teeth in a grin.

“How dare you?” protested Miss Thompson. “Take your hands—” the words chopped off in a shriek that was as much outraged astonishment as pain. Solo stiffened, but Kuryakin’s voice came, cold and chill.

“You won’t gain anything like that. You intend to kill us all anyway, so why should we tell you anything?”

“Admirably put, Mr. Kuryakin, and impeccably logical. There’s very little you can tell us, in any case, that we do not already know.” His snake-like glance went to Miss Thompson again. “Come here. One silly move, gentlemen, and she dies first. Stand there, to one side.”

She was an inch taller than he and stared at him in open dislike, clutching the diaphanous robe.

“You’ve ceased to be of any use to me, Louise. But you know far too much, and you talk too much. Your mouth will have to be stopped.” There came the shock crack of his palm as he struck her across the face without any warning, sending her reeling backward. His glass cold eyes returned to the two men, the gun in his hand as steady as ever.

“Your disposal presents a pretty problem. I am an artistic man. I like things to be done with a flair. Design and attention to detail is the factor that marks the intelligent man from the moron. Strip them!”

Solo moved instinctively in rejection, and that pistol moved with him, its tunnel-like muzzle centered implacably on him. Over it Green’s eyes were chill. Solo shrugged and permitted the rough hands of the seamen to wrench his clothing from him.

“That will do,” Green decided, when both men were down to underpants. “Leave the clothes here. Later you will douse them with alcohol. For now, come, and pay close attention. You two, march!”

They marched, into the cool and hygienic kitchen, where white tiles and chrome made a background like an operating theater. They sat, still under orders, in two kitchen chairs, back to back. Donovan and Flanagan worked now while Ponti watched with grinning appreciation. They had found a plastic clothesline in a drawer. When they were done with it the two agents were roped and tied as securely as they had ever known in a lifetime of similar experiences. Green stood in the doorway, supervising.

“Now,” he said, “pay attention. We are going to set the scene for the police to find, one they will be able to under stand. The story is this: that she telephoned them—which can be checked; that they were closeted together for some time; that they drank heavily and unwisely; they then quarreled violently, here, in that room, and in the bedroom— presumably over her. One or the other of them—it doesn’t matter which—strangled her and left her on the bed…”

Miss Thompson gave a choked cry of utter unbelief and terror at this shocking statement. The two heard the sound of a blow, then a whimper.

“Keep her quiet. The rest is reasonably simple. Both men become enraged, struggle with each other, then collapse, utterly drunk. The police will find them there. Questions?”

“How we get them drunk?” Ponti demanded.

“Very simply. Whiskey. Please observe, there is a gas supply here. With the gas turned on and the door shut they will become unconscious. Later you will bring them out, untie them, pour drink over and into them, conceal the cord and flush the gas from the room. There is very little detectable difference between the stupefaction induced by gas, and intoxication. Anything else?”

“Green!” Solo kept his voice as level as possible. “You’ve got us, and we’re in the habit of sticking out our necks, but do you have to drag her into this? Your dupe?”

“Dupe? Yes, I used her. But now she knows too much. Give me that bottle, Flanagan.” Seconds later Solo felt the chill of fluid on his scalp and smelled the stink of whiskey as Green tipped the bottle over his head.

“That’s a terrible waste of the hard stuff,” Donovan objected.

“Don’t be a fool, man, there’s plenty more. Help yourself, after the job’s done. See you do a good job of it, you’ve plenty of time. Break the place up. Play some loud music, just in case the neighbors get nosy. And just before you leave, dial 999 and then leave the receiver off the hook. Keep your gloves on at all times. Anything else?”

“About her,” Ponti demanded. “Some fun first, eh?”

“Help yourself.” Green said it in the same tone he had used about the drink. “It will make very little difference to the police.” He emptied the rest of the bottle over Kuryakin’s head, then handed it to Flanagan. “Not get it clear. Gas on and shut this door. Wreck the place thoroughly. It is now nine-forty-five. You have until eleven.”

“We meet you at the usual place?”

“No. Take the car and ditch it. It’s stolen in any case. Then disappear for a week. I’ll be out of touch until then anyway. At the end of that time you will be able to reach me as usual. Ponti, turn on all those gas taps.”

Solo strained his shoulders against the ropes as chill spirits ran down over his face and neck. He heard Green’s steps tap away and then:

“Goodbye, Louise. You will not be going to the ball, after all. The chief will be disappointed when you do not arrive. If it were possible, I would warn him, but it doesn’t matter all that much. He will be able to get someone else, I’m sure.” The tapping steps came back to the door. “Goodbye, gentlemen. As I told you, when I arrange things, they do not fail.” Then he shut the door after him, and the two men were in silence, broken only by the sibilant hiss of gas.

“This is a fine mess you’ve got me into,” Kuryakin sighed. “You and your law abiding British!”

“Two Irishmen and an Italian?” Solo retorted, straining at the rope again. “Anyway, Illya, I know one thing. We don’t have to worry how hard we hit those thugs.”

“I don’t suppose they are all that worried, either. If we don’t do something fast, the only thing we’re going to hit is the floor. The gas is thickening. Napoleon, do you ever think about Waterloo?”

“Not if I can help it. A pity we didn’t ask Miss Perrell how to conjure up knives out of thin air; we could use one right now.”

“Those sailors certainly know how to tie knots. And this plastic stuff doesn’t give anyone a chance. Hear that?” The sounds of furniture being wrecked came from the next room. Solo got the pungency of coal gas up his nostrils on top of the whiskey, and a high-pitched whistle started in his ears. Sanity told him there was very little time to go and nothing to do. He launched into another desperate lunge against the ropes around his chest and heard a faint creak from the chair. The chair!

“That’s it!” he said, his own voice sounding thin and far away. “The only weak spot, Illya. The chairs. We have to break them somehow.”

Faintly through the whistling in his ears he heard martial music. It sounded familiar.

“Zampa!” Kuryakin muttered. “I never thought to hear it again. We can use it for rhythm, Napoleon. Rock forward and back—now!”

Solo hurled his body forward against the rope, then back, and the two linked chairs rocked with him as the two men see-sawed back and forth, back and forth, until the legs were lifting and crashing back to the floor with each rock. Within breathless seconds they heard encouraging creaks and groanings and vent at it harder than ever. By now Solo could barely see the brightness of the kitchen for the gray fumes that twisted his vision. Breath tore burningly at his throat. All at once he was sitting on the hard floor amid

angular wreckage, then keeling over as his companion wriggled frantically to get some slack. Then, blearily, he was fumbling his arms and legs free, holding on to the gas burner, groping for the taps with fingers that felt like limp sausages. Kuryakin tottered to a window, got it open, and stood there sucking in great breaths of air. Solo scrambled over to stand by him and gasp.

"Close!" he panted. "Not a nice man, our Mr. Green."

"I can't say I care for his assistants, either. Mustn't let them get at Miss Thompson. You ready?"

Solo dragged in two more enormous breaths, shook his head testingly, and nodded. "Fit enough. Come on!"

Over at the door he put his forehead against it while he eased the catch free. There were vigorous noises coming through. He pulled the door just a fraction to make sure, nodded to Kuryakin, and hurled it all the way open, to go through with a rush. Just in time he saw the couch, up turned, right in his path. He leaped over it, landed catlike and whirled. Donovan stood over in one corner by the record player, a glass in one hand. At sight of Solo he froze, mouth open. Solo wasted no time but leaped on to the upside-down couch, sprang from it straight at Donovan, and the pair of them crashed into the record player.

With no time for finesse, Solo caught at the first thing at hand, a bottle, and slammed it down on Donovan's head. He scrambled to his feet, pressed a palm to the wall a moment as the room spun around him.

Over in the other corner he saw Kuryakin dance away from a swung chair and grab it, pull and drag Flanagan off-balance, then wallop him with a savage chop as the man went staggering by. Poised deliberately, he chopped again and Flanagan plunged face down to the floor. Feeling a certain amount of righteous satisfaction, Solo shoved away from the wall, then froze for a moment as a scream came through the half-open door of the bedroom and then cut off suddenly. Solo's momentary satisfaction was swallowed in a blind fury. He hit the bedroom door with his shoulder and went straight on through into dim light, onto a white sheepskin carpet, to see Ponti holding Miss Thompson down on the bed.

The crashing entry made the Italian let go instantly, heave up and spin, but Solo was already on him, throwing a piledriver punch with his right and grabbing with his left hand at the man's loosened coat. Unbalanced, Ponti tottered, sideways. Solo heaved to help him, dug in his heels and swung the

Italian around like a weight on a chain, then let go and watched him arch away and slam in a heap in a corner. But Ponti was no novice in rough and tumble. He bounced up like a ball, square on his feet, and in his right hand a knife glittering. The snarl of his white teeth split his dark face. Solo, who could hear the shocked sobbing of the girl at his back, waved him on.

"Come on!" he invited. Ponti wanted nothing more. Tensing, he sprang like a cat, right arm forward. Solo turned a shoulder to meet him, slid around the blade, laid both hands savagely on that wrist and arm, lifted up and down viciously bringing up his knee. There was an audible crunch as Ponti's wrist broke and a strangled scream as the Italian tried to let go. But Solo was not in a letting go mood. Ducking, using his shoulder, he heaved and hoisted, and Ponti flew. His short flight terminated at the bedroom door, with him upside-down and his flailing heels driving clean through the panel. He hung there, limp. Breathing hard, Solo spun back to the bed again. Miss Thompson crouched there, cringing, the shreds of her filmy housecoat clinging to one shoulder and trailing over the white counterpane behind her. Her violet eyes were wide and senseless in the half light as he stared at her.

"Are you all right?" he demanded, and she shivered.

"No, don't!" she choked. "No, don't! No, don't! No, don't!" Solo extended a protective hand, and then came a resounding crash from the room he had just left. He turned, sprang for the door, and it was jammed. He heaved frantically at the handle, wrenched at it, and the entire door creaked away from its hinges and sagged under Ponti's inert weight. With no time to be delicate, Solo heaved madly, shoved it through and ran over it as it fell. He was in time to see Kuryakin fling himself backward over the fallen couch as Flanagan flailed wildly with a chair leg.

"Hould still, ye murtherin' devil!" he roared, as Kuryakin rolled into a corner and came up. The timing couldn't have been better. As Flanagan hoisted himself up and over the hurdle, Solo took him from behind and added a powerful boost. The Irishman shot forward, Kuryakin leaned to one side, took hold and heaved, and the double impetus sent Flanagan arrowing forward, to meet the solid wall over the fireplace head on.

"Thick head, that one!" Kuryakin panted. "Was just going back into the kitchen to get the rope, when he came alive all at once."

"He won't do that again!" Solo stated, looking down.

“What—?” Kuryakin started a question and forgot it as a bottle burst on the wall between them. They fell and parted by reflex, then peered cautiously, to see Donovan entrenched in the corner between the sideboard and the ruined record player. There was blood all over his face, and he had a bottle in either hand. As Solo raised his head above the protective barrier of the couch, one of the bottles flew for him and he ducked again, fast.

Hold it!” he whispered urgently to Kuryakin. “I’ll try to winkle him out of there. You grab him. Here goes!” Seizing Ponti’s limp form, he got a good hold, then hoisted the inert Italian and ran forward, using the limp figure as a shield. Donovan snarled and lashed out with one bottle, but Solo fended it off with his burden, felt the crushing impact, dropped his shield and grabbed as fast as he could, before his opponent could regain balance. Clinging ruthlessly, he hurled himself backward, fell, got his feet up and under, kicked, and Donovan sailed over and out of the corner. There came a fiendish crash and clatter and then silence. Picking himself up, Solo turned, to see Kuryakin standing and looking down at the body, its head rammed into the bars of the fireplace.

“How is the Italian?” he asked, kneeling to investigate Donovan. Solo crouched, made quick exploratory touches with his fingers, then stood again.

“He’s taken his last voyage, Illya. How about those two?”

“Same ship. Frankly, Napoleon, bearing in mind what they were going to do to us, I can’t say I feel any remorse. How’s Miss Thompson?”

“She was in shock a moment ago. Let’s go see.”

She had moved. She was now sitting on the edge of the bed. As they went in her eyes, huge in the gloom, followed them fearfully. The rag that remained of her garment was now wrapped around her wrist. She put it to her mouth and mumbled, again, “No, don’t! No, don’t!”

“It’s all right,” Solo told her. “Nothing more to worry about. All over. We’re friends.” Her mumble grew fainter but was still there. Solo scowled, shook his head. “I’m not getting through. Miss Thompson!”

“Louise!” Kuryakin reached out to touch her hand gently, took hold of it. “No one is going to hurt you now. You’re safe.” It may have been his touch or the casual way in which he sat himself beside her on the bed, but all at once something seemed to snap in her and she turned to him blindly, reaching out to cling to him like a small child. As his arm went around her shoulders she thrust her face against his chest and began to shake. Solo sat

and stared, then caught the chill gleam in his partner’s blue eyes and nodded silently.

“That’s all very well,” Kuryakin muttered, “but what do we do now?”

EIGHT

IT WAS a good question, Solo considered it.

“We can’t blow headquarters for help,” he stated. “We’ve no transmitters—no clothes, come to that, although they will be about somewhere—and I hope they aren’t awash with alcohol. But in any case we are not officially on a job, and they wouldn’t be at all pleased with this mess.”

“Putting it very mildly. Nor can we call up friend Charles, either, seeing that we never bothered to let Miss Perrell know what we were up to.”

“True. And I am quite certain the police would take a very poor view indeed of a couple of—well, there are three dead bodies to account for!”

“Right!” Kuryakin murmured, gently stroking the soft shoulder that lay in his palm. “So there’s only one thing left.”

“That is?” Solo raised a brow. “Excuse me, I must have missed it. What?”

“We use Green’s story. Plus a few twists of our own. That is, if we can persuade Louise here into a bit of cooperation.”

Solo frowned, sniffed strongly, and rose to his feet. “Before anything else,” he declared, “I’m going to stick my head under the tap and get rid of the perfume of hooch.”

On the way back from the kitchen he located a bundled pile of clothing and grabbed it under his arm. Kuryakin was still sitting just as he had been before, but Miss Thompson had lifted her head and was staring at him.

“You say they are all dead?” she demanded, in a little girl voice quite different from her affected flute like tones. “Those three horrible men? Dead?”

“Right. We had no choice, Louise. It was them or us. You understand that, don’t you?”

“That’s absolutely true.” Solo came to stand by the bed. “That was the whole plan, start to finish.” Her eyes were enormous as she peered up at him. He sat gently. Kuryakin released her, patted her shoulder.

“Napoleon will look after you while I go and get this stuff washed off. And then we must work out what to do.”

She watched him go out, then swept the room with a stare as if she had never seen it before. The missing door puzzled her.

“It got broken in the struggle,” Solo explained. “I’m afraid your nice home is pretty well wrecked, Louise. Green succeeded in that much, at any rate.”

“He meant you to be killed,” she whispered. “He used me to get you here, so that he could kill you. He used me!”

“Shouldn’t let it bother you. He’s a very smart man. You wouldn’t be the first one he’s used. And you’re luckier than most. You’re still alive. There was another girl—” He saw the glistening tears start into her eyes and put out a helpless band to pat her. Once more she gave way to her feelings, but this time she was sobbing, harsh and wrenching sobs. There was nothing for him to do but wait for the storm to subside. And try to figure out what Illya had in mind. After a while coherent words began to come through her sobbing.

“I’m glad they are dead,” she said. “If it’s wicked of me, I don’t care, I’m glad!” Kuryakin came back, shaking his wet hair. Solo looked at him resignedly, then asked:

“About this plan, Illya?”

“Yes. Louise, do you think you could help us now?”

“You want me to help you?” The enormity of the idea shocked her into forgetting her tears. “Me? But you must hate and despise me, after what I’ve done!”

“Don’t be silly,” Kuryakin told her kindly. “Green is a killer, and so is his chief. They are the ones we’re after, not you. You believed you were doing something right and good. You didn’t mean any harm!”

“Oh!” she wailed. “I’ve been such a fool! I thought we were going to have such a nice time together. I was so looking forward to it, and now—”

“Steady!” Solo checked an incipient outburst of further tears. “It’s all right now, all over and done with. The thing now is to figure out some way to square everything up. You want to help, don’t you?”

“I’ll do anything!” she said fiercely. “Anything!”

“You won’t have to do very much,” Kuryakin assured her. “Green isn’t the only one who can contrive things. Look, I’ll draw the picture for you. Let’s assume that you were here all alone. A quiet evening watching TV or

listening to records, or just reading, whatever you prefer. Then, all at once, you hear a clatter as if someone is breaking in by the back door. So what do you do?"

"Eh?" She seemed baffled for a moment, then, "Oh! You mean—? I would be scared stiff. But then—I might just go as far as the kitchen door to look."

"Good! You do that. You open the door. You see two maybe three, big, rough men, breaking in. What do you do?"

"Scream like mad and run!"

"Good again. You run into here, this bedroom. You bolt the door. You're scared stiff. You hear somebody try the door, and you scream some more, but no one hears. Right? So the men abandon the door for the moment and start upsetting the place. They find the drink and start on it. They get rowdy and bust the place up. Then they remember you again and come for the door in earnest this time. They break it down, halfway. You scream as hard as you can. Then something puts them off. A noise, something. You don't know what. But they go away. All of them pile out by the back door, get into their car and drive off. You wait long enough to be sure they've gone; then you telephone the police. Now, do you understand all that?"

"Why, yes!" she said. "Of course. That's exactly what I would do."

"Fine. And that's the story you'll tell the police when they come. Just that. You didn't see the car, so you can't describe it, but you heard it. You can, and will, describe the men. Not Green, just the three seamen."

"You are indeed a very crafty Russian, Illya," put in Solo. "Green won't know a thing. He said himself he would be out of touch. One will get you ten he'll be aboard that yacht of his. It's the best alibi he could possibly have."

"And it gives us a week to catch up with him, Napoleon. If we can't nail him by then we don't deserve our reputations."

"What are you two?" she asked, swiveling her eyes from one to the other in wide interest. "Secret agents or something?"

"Certainly not!" Kuryakin contradicted. "We're foreign spies!" He grinned at her. For a moment her mouth gaped; then she caught it and laughed. It was a beautiful sound, but it went on a little bit too long. Solo lifted a palm warningly.

"No hysterics now, Louise. You've done very well so far."

She made an effort, calmed herself. “You’re very clever, anyway,” she decided, “and I want to do something to help. Anything!”

“Let’s all start by getting some clothes on,” Solo suggested, and she shrieked as she realized she was completely nude. She flushed rosy pink all over. The two men turned tactfully away and hurriedly sorted out their clothes, pointedly taking care not to turn again until they were dressed. But she was still naked.

“I don’t care!” she said defiantly. “After what I did, luring you two here to your deaths—and then you saved my life— it doesn’t seem to matter very much, does it? I mean—” and she went pink again. “I’ve always been a bit vain about my shape.”

“Here in your own home,” said Kuryakin, “it is entirely your own business whether you wear anything or not. But you’d better put something on your feet. There’s a lot of broken glass about. Napoleon, you’d better take your handkerchief and wipe anywhere we might have left fingerprints. I’m going to break in the back door, from the outside.”

She followed them around, watching and listening as they cleared up the odds and ends. She carefully refrained from looking at the bodies as they were hauled out the back way into the car. The two men came together amid the wreckage for a final check, and then something went click in Solo’s mind as he turned to Louise for one last assurance that she knew her part.

“Just a minute,” he breathed. “What was all that Green said, about you not going to the ball? What ball? You were being taken by his chief, I think he said, didn’t he?”

“That’s right!” she nodded her coppery head. “Mr. Green got me a lovely dress for it. Would you like to see it?” Before they could say anything she was away into the bed room and groping in a wardrobe there. Seconds later she came out putting the last touches to a jeweled clasp on her left shoulder. The material was something sheer that looked like spun gold foam, like an intangible shimmer between them and her. It swooped from either shoulder and met under her thrusting bosom, then molded itself and clung like metallic haze down to the ground.

“Do you like it?” she asked uncertainly. “Do you think it’s just a wee bit too revealing? Mr. Green said it would be just right for this one evening, as it’s a rather special affair. He said the topless fashion is the ‘in’ thing with private parties now.”

“It would have to be a very special affair, for that,” Kuryakin said. “Do you know where?”

“Let me guess,” Solo interrupted. “The Danby place.”

“How did you know that?” Her voice was shrill.

“Tricks in all trades, Louise. This chief of Green’s, do you know him? Who he is, I mean?”

She shook her head. “No. Green just told me where to go. It’s tomorrow evening, and I’m to go and meet the chief at his house. It’s all arranged. At least, it was!” Her face fell.

“Wait!” Solo thought hard. “Green said he would be out of touch, that he wouldn’t be able to inform his chief.”

“Steady on, Napoleon. Remember what happened to Mary Chantry.”

“I haven’t forgotten. You’re right, Illya. Once of that is enough. Forget all about it, Louise.”

She turned and went back into the bedroom while they carried out their final checkup. Solo managed to find one unbroken bottle amid the wreckage and rescued it. “We can use this for atmosphere in the car,” he decided. “I think that’s just about everything.” He turned to see her return, as naked as a baby and with a determined look on her face.

“It’s not everything,” she declared. “Please, you two, look at me. You were going to ask me to do something and then you stopped because it might be dangerous. And it’s not fair. I told you I would do anything. I want to. Look at me!” She spread her arms wide and appealingly. “What would I be now, if you two hadn’t saved me? Let me help!”

“You don’t need to be told what kind of people we are dealing with.”

“Of course I don’t. I know. What do you want me to do?”

“There’s nothing much to it,” Solo said swiftly. “Just go through with the party arrangements as they were made, go to meet the chief man—where’s that, incidentally?”

“It’s a private estate, a house called Piedmont, about twenty miles the other side of Norwood. I’m to take a taxi from the station.”

“All right. If you do that, carry on as planned, go to the Danby affair—we will be there too. Don’t acknowledge us. Just give some kind of sign, a touch of the hand to your hair will do, so we can identify the chief. That’s all! We just want to know who he is.”

“Nothing more than that,” Kuryakin stressed. “And you can still back out, if you want to. Just say.”

“I certainly won’t back out. The one bit I don’t like is that you’ll be there and I won’t be able to speak to you. I suppose you’ll be with some other girls? Beautiful ones?”

“Only one,” Solo grinned. “And—yes, she’s beautiful, but not in your class, Louise.”

“I’m glad you think I’m beautiful. I never really cared before, but I’m glad now. I suppose”—she was suddenly wistful—“once you’re done with this job I’ll never see you again, either of you.”

“Hard to tell,” Kuryakin said.

“You’ll always be welcome.”

“Yes. Well now…” Solo cleared his throat. “You know what to do? As soon as you hear the car drive off, wait five minutes and then ring the law. You know what to tell them? Right. Until we meet again.” He had half-turned to the door, but she came quickly to catch him, to pull his head down and kiss him. Then Kuryakin. Then she stood back.

“Until the next time,” she said.

Solo settled himself behind the wheel. Ponti’s body lay stretched on the floor by his feet. The other two were in the back. Kuryakin was keeping his feet on them.

Solo let the car purr out of the alleyway and into the road, then up the gradient. Villas slumbered on the left, secure behind their hedges. On the right the slope fell away steeply, with young saplings here and there to provide a semblance of a wood. They came to a sharp left hand curve.

“This will do, Illya. Get down there, see if the road is clear. I don’t want to smash up some innocent bystander.” He kept the engine purring while Kuryakin went slithering and skidding down the grassy slope to the road below. Out of the gloom, within a few seconds, came a shrill whistle, twice. Solo sighed, tilted the whiskey bottle liberally over the bodies, let in the clutch, steered the car at the slope, then threw the door open and fell out briskly, rolling over and over three times before he could seize a sapling to halt himself. In the gloom he saw the pale bulk of the car go rolling onward and down. In a moment he saw Kuryakin come back up the slope, using hands and feet and staring back over his shoulder. Then there came a most satisfying crash and jangle.

They regained the road and began to walk back, nodding a silent goodnight as they passed The Nest. Five minutes more brought them to the

stone steps and down in an official manner to the main road below. An elderly couple waited dismally at a bus stop. The man eyed them.

“Been here ten minutes,” he complained, “and not a sign. I reckon it’s gone. The last one.”

“Last bus?” Solo queried. “Shouldn’t worry, sir, I think it will be along. We’re in a lucky mood tonight. Ah, there it comes now!”

The bus growled to a halt to let them aboard. They ran upstairs and were hardly seated before they felt the bus take a violent swerve to avoid a flaring obstruction. There, just off the left hand lane, a car stood on its nose in the ditch, ablaze. Five more minutes and the bus driver had to swerve again as a fire engine roared past, closely followed by an ambulance. Solo sat back and smiled.

“That’s that,” he murmured. “Up to Louise, now. I hope she tells the story properly.”

“She will,” Kuryakin said. “She’s quite intelligent, despite her shape,” and he whistled softly, paying no attention to Solo’s stare.

NINE

NEXT MORNING, the room phone rang again. Solo answered it, to hear the switchboard girl tell him there was a lady on the line. With a fast gesture to Kuryakin he said:

"Thank you. Put her on," and he held his breath. But it wasn't Miss Thompson this time, although the voice was equally familiar.

"Mr. Solo?"

"Good morning, Miss Perrell. Nan. Nice to hear you. I was about to ring you, as it happens."

"Oh! Why?"

"Well, you remember that business about us being invited to the orgy at Danby Hall? We'd like to take it up."

"Are you deliberately trying to provoke me?"

"Not at all, but it seems a pity to miss such an occasion, especially since there doesn't seem to be anything else urgent. Or is there? I'm sorry, you rang me, didn't you?"

After a pause she sighed. "It wasn't urgent. I wanted to give you the name and address of a dealer who will fix you up with a small car and ask no awkward questions."

"That's very kind. One moment." He fished out a note book and pen. "Just off Tottenham Court Road," he noted.

Then, "About the Danby riot," said Miss Perrell. "You really want to go? Seriously?"

"Seriously," he confirmed, and heard her sigh again.

"It's a charity, you know. Can you afford it? There is no maximum, but the taken-for-granted minimum is one hundred pounds. In dollars—"

"Around three hundred, yes, I know. And yes, we can stand it."

"Very well, there's nothing more to say, I suppose. You can pick me up at my place in your new car, and I'll take you from there. Please be in properly formal clothes."

"All right. Not fancy dress?"

"No. Only the ladies are spectacular in this affair!"

Solo replaced the instrument and smiled thoughtfully; then he caught the glint in Kuryakin's eye and shrugged. "You heard. Charity."

"Some vacation! Thanks for helping me spend my own money!"

"Never mind. Think about the excitement, the thrills that set the blood coursing vigorously though the veins!"

"That part is fine. It's when it starts gushing out of the holes that I don't care for it. Napoleon, you go ahead on your own on this car business, I'm going to eat in. I'll pick you up later."

"Oh! Something in mind?"

"Nothing special. Only, the way the opposition is working at putting us away, they must be after something very important, and we have a very good information service right here. I thought maybe if I kept my ears open I might get a lead or two."

"Watch it now," Solo warned, "and see they don't wish some kind of job on you. Or us. Where'll I meet you?"

"Hmm!" Kuryakin mused. "For lunch, around twelve-thirty, at the Old Cock Inn. That's at the lower end of Fleet Street."

"Sounds something special. Is it?"

"Historical interest. As used by Charles Dickens, among others."

The "little car dealer" turned out to be a large and busy double fronted garage and service station, but by mentioning the name he had been given, Solo was rapidly passed from one to another until he wound up in an open area backing the gas pumps.

"Stone's the name," said a small, sharp eyed man in stained overalls. He put out a wiped hand in greeting. "You'll be Napoleon Solo, I reckon. I had a call about you."

"Good staff work. You'll know what I'm after, then?"

"I have just the job for you. This way." They halted by a car that made Solo lift his brows in wonder.

"She said small and inconspicuous, but this is a joke, isn't it?"

"Not on your life." Charlie Stone patted the red Mini affectionately. "This job may not be much to look at from the outside, but it's been worked over by an expert, let me tell you. Hop in!"

By the time Solo hopped out again he was convinced, and impressed. He was still a trifle breathless at the way a mere touch on the gas pedal brought instant and surging acceleration. Stone gestured him into a lean-to office and closed the door after them carefully.

“You’ll have no trouble with her,” he said, raking in a drawer for the necessary documents. “All I ask is, when you’re done you bring her back here. On paper it will be a sale, and a trade in afterwards, but we don’t need to bother about that, between us.”

“That’s very understanding of you.”

“Never mind. There’s something else you might be interested in. I don’t know anything official, mind,” Stone grinned wolfishly, “but I have a hobby. Might be in your line. This kind of thing.” He slid something on to his desk, and Solo picked it up curiously. At first glance it looked like a rather thick strip of adhesive tape, flesh colored, eight inches long and an inch wide. Stone said:

“You peel off the backing, when you’re ready, and stick it. Anywhere handy, like up the inside of your wrist. Or between your shoulder blades, if you like that better. For a woman, what with the way modern dresses are, on the inside of the upper arm is a good place. Anyway, once it’s on, it won’t come off easily, and it can’t be seen. On this side, now…” He took it from Solo, and tugged at one end, where the surface was serrated, and all at once he had a knife in his hand. Three inches of it were pink padding, the remaining five were flexible steel. “This side’s a razor edge, that’s a diamond hard file along the other. Very handy.”

“I agree. I’ve seen something just like this recently.”

“I thought maybe you had. That’s yours, if you want it.”

Solo decided he did, and reached for his pocket, but Stone put up a hand.

“Compliments of the house, Mr. Solo. Just a hobby. I like to do what I can. There’s all sorts of ways of helping out.”

Solo reached the Old Cock about five minutes ahead of his appointment time, to find Kuryakin seated in the saloon nursing a pint mug of beer. The Russian agent looked up and grinned.

“Ask for Flowers,” he advised, “and you’ll get a pleasant Surprise.”

“Got the car,” Solo said, returning from the bar. “Show you it later. What did you get?”

“A lead or two. I dug up a newspaperman who used to work pretty closely with John Guard, swapping information. His name’s Ray Carpenter; he should show up any minute now.” Right on cue a long limbed, gangling man shoved through the door, stopped to look around, then came over to them with long strides.

“Kuryakin? Solo? I’m Carpenter. Shall we go straight in? I’m hungry, and I hate to rush a meal.”

They followed him through into the rear regions, where there were small four seat tables in booths, red checkered tablecloths, old oak beams and an atmosphere of age. Carpenter ordered for all three, at their request.

“You can come back another time and soak up the atmosphere,” he told them, “but right now the grub’s the thing. You ask away, I’ll do what I can to answer. All I know is that you’re in the same game Johnny used to play, and he’s caught it. At last. Can’t say I’m surprised, the way he used to go at things, but anything I can do to hit the opposition, I will.”

“He’s not dead, you know,” Solo offered. “In fact, unless we get on the ball, he’s liable to break out of the hospital and go chasing them on his own. And these boys play it rough!”

“Can we get something straight first,” Kuryakin murmured. “You’re a newsman. We wouldn’t want to strain your discretion.”

Carpenter laughed. “I’ll have to educate you the same way I did John. Look, forget the movie and TV version of a reporter, please. By them, all that comes in the ears pours out in print, regardless. Not true. I hear a thousand things I would like to see in print, but I never will, because they aren’t the kind of things the public is prepared to buy. And I assure you, I would never dream of reporting any thing from or about you, or U.N.C.L.E., without your express O.K. first. All right now?”

Carpenter went silent as he ingested a large mouthful, then broke out again. “To give you a sample, look at the current ruction going on about population control. Every newspaper in the land ought to propagandize in favor, but they don’t. You know why? Freedom of the individual. Every man likes to think he is free to choose for himself whether or not he’s going to have a family, and he won’t like any newspaper that tries to tell him he has no right to that freedom. You know why, again? Subconscious. He can’t help thinking that if that kind of idea was accepted in society, he might never have been born!”

“About playing rough.” Solo brought the talk back to business. “We might be able to drop something for you, at that. The girl who was found in the sea at Hastings, for instance. Her name’s Mary Chantry, and she didn’t die at Hastings, but on the beach outside John Guard’s bungalow. That’s how it all started. Then, you may have heard about a teenage riot on the Embankment, night before last. That was us. Somebody tried to have us

removed. Again, last night, over Watford way, somebody broke into a villa, smashed the place up, scared the occupier into hysterics, then crashed their car as they drove off. Three drunken seamen. That, also, was us. Same idea."

"You move around, don't you?"

"We try. But we don't know who we're striking at, and that's where you could come in. What do you know about one Absalom Green, for instance?"

"Nothing for you." Carpenter frowned over a couple of swallows. "He is a connoisseur-dealer objet d'art man, specializes in gem stones and small carvings, trinkets, jewelry that kind of thing. Wealthy, owns a yacht, is reputed to skate close to the fringes now and then, but nothing to prove it."

"Suppose I told you the yacht is not his, but belongs to the man he works for?"

"You told me, now I know what I didn't know before. Sorry."

"All right." Solo sighed, made passes at his plate. "What about the Countess of Danby, then?"

"You can have her, Hippies make news. So do love-ins and pot, and any kind of improper sex and/or sadism. Flower people, even. But when a lot of very important and rich society folk get together for a party and have fun, that's no good to us. Lady Herriott's affairs are on the level. No crime. And for charity."

Solo scowled at this insider's view of press ethics. "What about a certain Miss Nanette Perrell, then?"

Carpenter straightened up a fraction, disposed of his current mouthful carefully, then asked, "Just how involved are you with her?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Plenty. I prefer to tell the truth as I know it, but not if it means you are likely to take me outside and beat my brains out. You know?"

"That's all right," Solo grinned. "We are not that kind of involved."

"Both of you? Well, that could be one way—I'll tell you, to us unfortunate sensation sellers Nan Perrell is known as the Deadly Peril, or the Kiss of Death, to taste. She is very rich, completely single, and extremely easy to get, at first glance. The pattern runs like this. She catches lions. The society kind. Men who are good at something and fool enough to brag about it. Swimming, shooting, wrestling, swords or arrows, high diving—you name it, brag about it where she can hear, and she'll flutter

those baby blue eyes, kid you on to show off—and then smear you at your own game. She is good. Very, very good. What are you two good at?”

“Listening,” Kuryakin murmured. “How long has she been fighting this private war of the sexes?”

“About seven or eight years. My guess is her father wanted a boy and never got over it. Jim Perrell was a mining engineer. Tough, like leather and piano wire. You know”—Carpenter pushed his plate away—“I have a theory about her. Someday she is going to run into the man who can beat her. And that will break her all to pieces. Then, if he cared to pick up the pieces, he would be able to do what he liked with her. End of sermon. Anything else I can do?”

“Yes.” Kuryakin inserted himself into the discussion now in a tone that made Solo prick up his ears. “I hear rumors about what could be a silly season story. Something about it crazy Hungarian inventor who discovered a new electronic crystal formula that is supposed to amplify mental powers?”

“Hah!” Carpenter threw back his head in a laugh. “We’ve all heard it. That’s the kind of thing that always creeps out of the woodwork about this time of year. Various versions. Some say it’s yttrium iron garnet, others claim it’s gallium arsenate.”

“Arsenide,” Kuryakin corrected. “I’ve checked on it. Peculiar stuff. In certain circumstances it displays negative resistance—”

“Hey!” Carpenter brought his head down again, and his eyes narrowed intently. “It’s not a silly season rumor?”

“It may not be. What have you heard?”

“Basically the inventor is supposed to be one Devos Gorchak—”

“Right,” Kuryakin nodded. “I know about him. Thrush has used him a time or two, but they won’t hold him down, because he’s unreliable. Crazy. Besides being a chemical electronics wizard, he is also a mathematics puzzle fanatic. The story I heard is that he’s dead, but you can never believe that, with Thrush in the background.”

“What’d he do?” Solo demanded, and Carpenter scowled.

“The story is that he perfected this crystal stuff and discovered that merely by touching a bit of it with a finger it amplified certain mental powers. According to the shape, it tunes in to different powers, like command, suggestion, sex attraction, inspiration, that kind of thing. According to one version, Gorchak took a bit of this stuff in his hand down

the village street and he had every woman in the place following him like sheep."

"Just holding it in his hand?" asked Solo.

"That's not so unlikely," said Illya. "Remember, every square inch of the skin has millions of nerve endings, which eventually communicate back to the brain. For amplification, that's enough. What really matters is the pattern, the injected signal."

"You mean this is for real, Illya?"

"Real enough to have headquarters seething like a pot on a fire. The version they have is that Gorchak managed to calculate the precise shapes for various potentials and carved the crystals—they are not gallium arsenide, incidentally, but something very similar, we don't know what—he carved a number of crystals in such a way that they can be fitted together to make a cube. And the man who holds that cube in his hand is master. His power will be fantastic and invincible."

"Hold it a minute!" Solo clung to sanity grimly. "Why didn't Gorchak just keep it for himself?"

"Two reasons, so far as I can find out. One, he knew that he himself was unstable. And this is like drugs, like LSD. It expands, so it will make a sane man brilliant, but an unbalanced man would be destroyed by it. And he seems to have had one of his regular differences with the technological hierarchy in policy. So he scattered his carvings all over the place."

"That's right!" Carpenter nodded excitedly. "It's a kind of chase. All sorts of people are after the pieces."

"But there's one really big snag," Kuryakin pointed out. "Gorchak was crazy. He cut those pieces in such a way that just to hold any one in your hand is enough to knock you for a loop in short order. Like a belt of vodka on an empty stomach. So even if one man could assemble them all, he still has to figure out how to put them together."

"Now I get it," Solo groaned. "Twenty-five pieces I have, and two to go. An insoluble problem, he called it. Three by three by three, to make a cube, and he has them all."

"That's right, Napoleon. And he reckons he knows a way to solve the thing. We don't have much time."

"Look!" Carpenter cleared his throat carefully. "If this really is a story, and you get anything, remember where I live, won't you? What I mean, this is a *story*!"

“If we live to tell it,” Kuryakin promised gravely, “you shall have the exclusive.”

After he had hurried away, pleading pressure of business, the two men were silent awhile in thought.

“We ought to report this, Illya. Mr. Waverly would skin us if he knew we were holding out.”

“Holding out what? The only real clue we have is the Danby affair tonight, and that may not come off. Besides, those crystal parts are not much bigger than a pea. The whole thing—the cube—is only an inch each way. It’s not going to be easy to find, even if we are looking in the right place.”

“You know,” Solo sighed, “this whole business is full of stones; on the beach for target practice, on John Guard’s window ledge, now these wild carvings. Even the man who sold me the car was called Stone. But I still can’t fit in that hit about ‘the seventh stone’ at all.”

TEN

THE MINI rolled to a stop outside the Perrell residence that evening. Miss Perrell, tall and regal in white and cream, came out to walk around the little red car and turn up her nose at it.

“Charlie Stone’s idea of a joke, I suppose,” she said, and her voice and manner indicated near freezing conditions as the two men climbed into the Princess alongside her. She got into gear and plunged swiftly into the traffic, keep silent for a long while. Then:

“Been busy, have you?”

“A little,” Solo murmured. “Studying maps, learning the district. For instance, Danby Hall is about an hour away isn’t it?”

“That’s quite right. Of course, I might just have managed without that bit of information, but I’m obliged to you just the same!”

Solo shrugged, exchanged silent glances with Kuryakin and let the silence reign. He had spoken the truth, and now both men were intently on the lookout for sign posts, and one in particular. They saw it together, just a few mile beyond Norwood. A finger post indicating a road that would take them to Piedmont. They exchanged glances again. After a long while Miss Perrell stirred, sighed, and said:

“Since you are my guests, we might as well pretend to be on speaking terms, just for the look of it. Somebody say something.”

“A question,” Kuryakin murmured. “You’ve never been to one of these affairs before. Why not?”

“That’s my business!” she snapped, and Solo leaned back and smiled.

“End of conversation,” he said, and began to whistle silently. The car purred on, swooping through villages and along lesser roads until they came to the crest of a rise and she slowed down.

“There it is,” she told them.

They studied it. The massive square frontage, gray and white with white marble pillars, was patched and shaded with ivy. In the growing gloom the light pouring from windows and the open porch doorway helped to conjure up an illusion of an old demon face with a beard, glowing eyes and a fanged

mouth wide open in invitation. Miss Perrell flicked on her lights and sent the car sailing down the slope and in between wide open iron scroll gates, up to the forecourt. Out of the car, she led them up a gracious flight of stone steps into the faint babble of many voices and the sound of music. A massive servant garbed like a Roman slave came to take her cream satin cloak and to escort all three of them across an immense tiled hall to the double doors where their hostess stood. Her nod and smile were enough to send the servant stalking away again. Lady Herriott was once again in green, in a tint that no woman in her right mind would have tried to wear, but this time the material was some kind of linen, draped casually about her after the fashion of a Greek *chlamys*. The whole thing depended on one gold pin, and had that failed, she would have been nude, but for her huge rubies.

"I'm so glad you could come," she said, and made it sound genuine. "You two must have some secret or other. I been trying to lure Nan here for ages, but this is the first time."

"Should we pay now?" Kuryakin asked, and she frowned delicately.

"Not payment, dears. That's illegal. Call it contributions, or donations. You can do that now, if you like. I usually make a little speech when we're all here, and then collect, but you can do it now."

"We'd prefer that," Solo smiled. "You see, we don't really expect to stay very long. Would a thousand dollars be all right? I have the check all ready, if you'll tell me who I make it out to."

He scribbled at her dictation, Miss Perrell standing by in bleak silence. Kuryakin eyed her curiously but made no comment.

"Oh dear," complained Lady Herriott, "I do hope you won't want to dash off, once you see what we have to offer. That would be a pity."

Then they were through the door and stepping down over thick carpet to floor level of an enormous room, almost circular, with a lofty ceiling ablaze with lights, where the great stretch of the center floor was like glass, and tapestry screens had been set up all around the perimeter to give the impression of many secluded little booths, each with a table. There were only a few people present as yet, and an empty place was easy to find. Solo took this first chance to study Miss Perrell in the clear light, and he was quietly impressed.

She had put on a close fitting dress of creamy white satin which came almost to her fingertips, hugged her shape as far as her hips and then

descended almost to floor level in luxurious folds. The effect was that of a cloistered nun. Even her makeup was muted. But there was a glitter in her blue eyes that spoke of fires below. Solo noted it and took time to think of something harmless to say. Before he could find it there came a hail from his right and he saw Evadne Herriott approaching across the floor, determination in her every line.

"You," she said, aiming a finger at Kuryakin. "Dance with me!"

It was an order. Solo grinned at his friend and gestured to the floor. Miss Herriott spared him a gleam and said, "I'll be back for you later. If you don't mind, Nan?"

"Why should I mind? I don't own him!"

Which was true but hardly gracious, Solo reflected, watching Illya proceed away with the predatory Evadne. She was worth watching. Her costume—if you could call two small patches of clustered pearls, a bracelet, and the skimpiest kilt ever seen in or out of Scotland, a costume—hampered her movements not at all. Solo stared, recovered breath, turned to his partner.

"Shall we dance? That much, at least, we have in common."

He was wrong. She came into his arms stiffly, and it took only three or four steps to know that the magic she had shown at Ferrier's was no longer working. He guided her to the edge of the floor tactfully, then said:

"Look, lady, if you want to bite or scratch or screech—or even take me outside and shoot me—let's do it and get it over with, but let's not ruin a perfectly good waltz, huh?"

"You talk of ruin, after that charming character reference you just gave Maggie Herriott?"

"I'm sorry, you have to play that bit again, I didn't get it."

"You said," she muttered through her teeth, "that you didn't expect to stay very long. Your tone included me. That will be taken to mean that you are not very interested in the attractions being offered here. From which it follows, as the night the day, that you have your own source of superior supply."

"Oh!" Solo thought it through. "Meaning you?"

"Who else? We came together!"

"But you know I didn't mean anything like that."

"Do I? I don't remember you explaining that part." She smiled pointedly. "Even if it's true, do you think that makes it any better? That you

look and then turn up your nose?”

“Hmm!” Solo thought that bit over and sighed. “I can’t win. And I thought this was going to be fun!”

All at once her mood changed dramatically. “Does it look like fun?” She gestured to the rapidly filling floor. Solo looked with sharpened eye and curiosity. The men were all of a kind, almost anonymous in formal evening dress. They managed to look furtive, uncomfortable and unwilling, but determined not to show it. The women, though, were another matter. There was every color imaginable, and textures all the way from toweling to the most gossamer sheer, and there was more bared flesh, taken wholesale, than would have been possible anywhere outside a Turkish bath. But they too had that unhappy and determined not to show it look.

“Trying too hard,” he guessed. “They’ve heard the message, that nudity and sex and love are all the rage now, so they are determined to be ‘with it.’ But it’s not really them.” He pondered a bit more. “These are all rich people, important people in some way, right? So they have a value on themselves. And they can’t let go. They are just going through the motions because it’s the thing to do, but they would far rather be smothered in sables and diamonds and make a show that way.”

“That’s rather profound.” Miss Perrell looked impressed despite herself. “Are you quoting somebody?”

“No. Just thinking. After all, this fuss about the flower people, the hippies, is largely because they are rejecting most of the things ordinary people value. And when you think about it, those things are largely outward show. Ostentatious expenditure. Remember what Evadne said about nudists on Levant? You couldn’t tell one from the other, they all look the same. People do, underneath. So”—warmed to his theme as the ideas came to him—“if you tend to be a somebody without artificial trappings, you have really got to be good. It isn’t something you can buy.”

“Oh!” She looked thoughtful. “Perhaps I should take off this stupid dress, then? Stop pretending to be—”

“Save it,” he grinned. “You don’t have to prove anything to me. Shall we try that dance again?”

“Do you really want to?”

Solo caught what he had been straining to see all this time, just a flash of coppery red hair over there. It was enough. “Eh? Want to? You bet I do. Come on!”

Meanwhile Mr. Kuryakin was having troubles of his own. Evadne was setting a pace that he couldn't possibly keep up with, but that didn't worry her at all.

"You just watch me," she invited. "When the steam starts coming out of your ears, then we'll see what we can do let it off."

So he watched her and hoped that the glue she had used was good stuff, or she was going to lose her pear patches. From time to time he spared a quick glance for the others on the floor. One slim girl circled sedately past him, at arm's length from her partner, and, like him, she wore a black tailcoat. And a veil. And nothing else at all. And there was a Spanish vivid girl, every bit as lively as Evadne, who had achieved her costume by simply dipping handfuls of flower petals in some kind of gum and dabbing them all over herself. But then, out of the babble and rhythm, came a voice.

"My dear young lady, I am, I assure you, performing the oscillations you require of me. On the inside. The news has yet to reach the outskirts, alas. It will take time!"

Kuryakin knew that voice, would never forget it. He fixed Evadne with a chill eye, extended his arm and waved her close.

"Touching is for later, darling!" she protested, but he took her by the wrist and held her close, working her around in conventional steps until he could see where the voice had come from. It came again.

"I fear it is a labor of futility, my dear. My body could never contort itself like that, nor would it look attractive if it did. I leave it, delightfully, to you."

Kuryakin looked. That was Louise, sure enough, and the man with her fitted the mental picture. A veritable Falstaff, he had a pinkly cherubic face and a great shining dome of a head. Kuryakin locked his partner close.

"You know everybody here?"

"Naturally. There isn't one can hold a candle—"

"Shut up! Look, that large man dancing with the redhead in gold."

"That's Uncle Henry. Silly old man, he is."

"Your uncle?"

"Of course not! I just call him that. He's an old friend of the family, comes here often."

"What's his name?"

"Now look here!" Evadne grew restive under the questioning. "You forget about him. Pay attention to me, that's what I'm for—"

“The name!”

Evadne’s lower lip protruded and quivered as if tears were imminent. She said, fast and furious, “If you must know, his name is Henry Beeman. He is filthy rich. He lives quite close. When he’s home, that is. And he knows the rudest stories I ever heard, so there!”

“Thank you!” Kuryakin whirled her swiftly and skillfully to the edge of the floor and released her. “Sorry about all this, but I have to go now. Urgent business. Some other time, perhaps.” He stepped away, peering through the throng, and saw Solo coming to meet him, with Miss Perrell, set faced and silent, on his heels.

“Got him spotted, Illya, and the high sign from Louise.”

“Me too. I heard him, first. Our man, sure enough. And I have his name, from Evadne.”

“Good. I was scared to ask you know who, the mood she’s in.”

“But we need her for transport, Napoleon.”

“Yes. Pray for me, huh?” He tried on a smile as he turned to Miss Perrell. “Look, Nan!” he murmured. “We’ve seen. It’s very nice, but we’re not all that impressed. We’d like you to take us home. Back to your place, that is. Would you?”

“Both of you?” she sounded baffled.

“That’s the way we prefer to work,” Kuryakin explained. “Together. We always do that.”

Solo smiled at her. “Let Lady Herriott think what she likes, eh? You don’t really mind about that, do you?”

“I suppose I don’t, really. All right, come on.” They followed her around and to the double doors again. Lady Herriott stood by the low table while the immaculate Monty Hagen counted a sizable pile of engravings with great care, mumbling to himself.

“You’re leaving? So soon? Nothing went wrong, I hope?”

“Not a thing, Lady Herriott. Let’s say we found what we were looking for, and we’re satisfied.”

“I’m taking them home with me,” Miss Perrell said, rather more loudly than was necessary. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not, my dear. Have a lovely time, won’t you?”

“Thanks, Maggie, I intend to. Come on, you two.”

Solo was so intent on his discovery, and involved with tentative plans ahead, that he missed completely the innuendo between Miss Perrell and

their hostess. It didn’t begin to dawn on him until they were entering the car and she suggested he should drive.

“So that I can sit between you,” she explained. The uncertainty in her voice was his first intimation something was going on that he hadn’t caught, but he took the wheel any way and sent the car growling around in a sweep, into the road and storming up the hill.

“You’re a forthright pair, I’ll say that,” she declared. “I don’t know whether to be offended or flattered. Flattered, naturally, if a bit overwhelmed.”

Baffled by her playful tone, Solo said, “We didn’t think you’d understand.”

“We know, of course,” Kuryakin put in helpfully, “that the Danby kind of thing isn’t in your line.”

“Right,” Solo endorsed, wondering what Illya was trying to lead up to. “Of course, once we had found out—what we wanted to know—there was no point in staying. And it was no fun for you, either.”

“It certainly wasn’t. I think it’s rather pathetic, all those nice people trying so hard to be wicked, just for the thrill of it. You’re very deep, the pair of you.”

“We are?” Solo kept his eyes on the road and began to feel uneasy. “What makes you say that?”

“You don’t have to be gentle with me any longer, Napoleon. It may be simple for you, but it had never occurred to me before that I was just like all the rest. Pretending. Afraid of reality. You’ve really shown me, haven’t you? And you”—she put her hand on Kuryakin’s knee and smiled at him—“were really wonderful, too. You let me off lightly. Oh yes, it hurt like the devil, but that was my own fault. And it hurt more, afterwards, when you didn’t bother to collect—what you’d won! I didn’t understand that until Napoleon explained it, tonight. That people have a lot of false values on themselves. That they ought to be able to be honest, to let themselves go and be real.”

Solo risked his eyes away from the road for a flash of utter bewilderment to his companion and met the same expression there. Then, all at once, it dawned on him that she was talking about something totally other than what they had in mind, and he almost drove the powerful car off the road as he realized what.

“Look,” he muttered, “Nan—I think we need to clear up a point or two. We’re not trying to rush you into anything. At all!”

“You’re being kind again. Telling me that it can’t last. I have realized that from the first moment I started on this kind of work. I had to learn to live just one day at a time, with no tomorrow.”

“Almost home,” Solo muttered thankfully, and lifted his foot as the gates drew near. He settled her car close to the steps. Then he steeled himself for a bad moment. Illya got out hastily and made for the Mini. She saw him go, frowned, turned to Solo, and he said:

“That’s it, Nan. Much obliged for the lift home. Now we have to rush. Very urgent. See you sometime!” and before she could catch her breath he was out from under the wheel and hurrying to join his companion.

“Get going, fast!” he muttered as he scrambled in.

He strained against the cushions as Kuryakin gave the little car lots of fuel, sending it roaring forward. His last glimpse of Nan was a tall, white, somehow tragic figured staring blankly after them.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Napoleon, but I got the idea, right at the last, that she was contemplating a menage a trois with us?”

“That’s the trouble with idealistic females, Illya. They don’t just bend a little, they break in pieces. Like Carpenter said, remember? Forget it. Keep an eye out for that sign.”

They found it some fifteen minutes later and swung off to follow the indication, finding themselves in a quiet, almost deserted road that ran on a gentle downward gradient for a mile, then swung into a tremendous right hand curve. Kuryakin killed the engine and they climbed out.

“That’s it, Napoleon. That’s why it’s called Piedmont. Foot of the mountain. It isn’t exactly a mountain, but that house is certainly right at the foot of it. And there isn’t another for miles.”

The road curved widely away to the right, then reversed and swooped down and back to pass the front of the house. While they were standing, a distant bobbing light became a motorcyclist, tracing out the road for them and eventually roaring past and away the way they bad come.

“Beeman’s the name,” Kuryakin murmured, “Henry Beeman, and filthy rich. So it’s reasonably certain that his approaches will be guarded.

Solo stared down the almost vertical slope, studying the bushes and grass clumps. “That way.” He pointed. “Over the brick wall. We’ll stash the

Mini among those bushes back there, get these glad rags off, and then we'll see what sort of a home life Mr. Beeman has."

"Yes." Kuryakin sounded thoughtful. "Napoleon, do you ever stop to wonder why we do these things? I mean, we were all set for what looked like a very entertaining evening. We rushed away from it, and Miss Perrell tried her best to hand us another version of the same thing. And yet, here we are. Don't you ever wonder?"

"If I ever stopped to think about things like that I'd never draw my wages, Illya. Come on, let's not waste time."

ELEVEN

THE FOOT of the slope brought them to a small stream and then an eight foot stone wall with a top fringe of broken glass.

“Cautious man,” Solo murmured, stripping off the dark sweater he had just put on a few minutes before and stretching up to toss it carefully across the hazard. Kuryakin made a step with his back, and Solo went up. A moment later the pair of them were perched and studying the gloom below. Bushes bulked in the dark, and there were no lights from the dark mass of the house in the distance.

“We take no chances, Napoleon. At the first sign of any alarm we rum for it. This is just an investigation, right?”

“Right. Down we go.” They struck and rolled on grass side by side. Solo had brought the sweater down with him. He squirmed into it now, then froze as he heard a faint rustle, the pad of footsteps of some kind and then a deep throaty growl. It sounded like a dog, a big dog, and they both knew the drill for such an event. Separate. Let the dog choose one and get occupied; then the other would close in. He sank to a crouch and held still.

“Get a mouthful of that, sonny!” whispered Solo, thrusting the arm so that the questing fangs had a target, and gritting his teeth as the bite struck through the heavy knit. The dog’s only weapon thus taken care of, he reached out with his other hand and grabbed an ear, grabbed it viciously, and heaved, even as he went over and down under the charge. The dog whined, he heaved harder, twisting, and the savage fangs let go just for a moment. It was all he could hope for. Out went his other hand, groping and seeking, avoiding the teeth, finding the other ear and clamping on. He hung on, wondering where Illya was. He got to his knees, stole time to stare aside into the gloom, and saw his companion rolling on the grass with the mate to the dog he was fighting.

“Oh well!” he muttered. “One each! It’s fair. Come up, you!” and he struggled to his feet, still grimly hanging on to the ears. Now in the gloom he could see the savage muzzle close to him and knew that he had to win this decisively, that it was no time for half measures. Clenching his teeth,

Solo braced himself, then fell, using all his weight, flat onto the squirming beast. Using both hands like hatchets he chopped again and again, hitting as hard as he could The dog heaved frantically in wild desire to get its fangs into him. He laid hold of a front leg, then the other, wrenched on them, struggling to his feet. For a moment the pair of them swayed in a mad ballet, then out of the gloom came Kuryakin, to sway and then land a blow like a hammer. The dog made a strained squeal and fell limply to the ground. Solo flexed his hands. It had taken only a. few seconds, but he was soaked with sweat and felt limp.

"Thanks, Illya. Call it a day," he muttered. "We'd better get while we can."

"I'll second that. Friend Beeman trains his dogs too well." They stood a moment to catch breath. Then, before they could turn back to the wall, a blinding white light struck out of the gloom, catching both of them full face, and a harsh, chesty voice ordered:

"Don't nobody move. There's two barrels of sudden death looking right at you. Just hold still now!"

"I know that voice," Solo breathed. "It's Rambo, the puncher. I'd love to meet him. He can't shoot both of us at once—"

"Hey, Sampson! Delilah!" the chesty voice came again, imperatively. "What in tarnation happened to those dogs?" Solo tensed, all ready to make a sideways leap; then he dismissed the wild notion as he heard sounds away to one side, and Rambo's voice again.

"Hey, Hoppy, you see anything of the dogs?"

"Hang on a minute, mate!" a new voice demanded, in a nasal Australian whine. "I think I found one. Yeah, I got one. Dead as mutton!"

"You sure, Hoppy?"

"Course I'm sure. And here's the other one, same way. These fellows must have clobbered them well and truly. I call that downright unfriendly!"

Solo squinted into the light, shifting his feet cautiously, trying to get a line on this other enemy, when all at once he heard a sharp thump, and spun as Illya staggered forward and began to fall. Then a bright light exploded inside his skull and he fell forward into darkness.

Realizing that he was awake, Solo kept quite still and waited for his head to go away. He opened an eye cautiously, wondering how all the rust had crept into it. The other was just as bad. He focused on a glow, a pool of

light on something glossy, and decided that he was in a chair, that he was tied up, his head hanging forward and looking at a tabletop. With care he elevated his sight angle a little at a time. The light stretched, leading him to a pair of hands. Hands in motion, strong and clever hands, picking up and putting down small black things that caught momentary glitter from the light. Trying to fit them together. And there was a thin, threadlike whistle. Explanations began to come. Solo made the effort, raised his head to look.

"Ah!" Henry Beeman said gently. "You are with us again, Mr. Solo? Mr. Kuryakin's head is a little harder than yours. He has been conscious for some time, but shamming."

"Waiting!" Kuryakin contradicted. "I'm in no hurry."

"Nor me, indeed. We have all night for it."

"For what?" Solo found his voice. "You expect us to talk, to tell you things?"

"Hardly. Louise told me all I need to know before she passed out. You're a pair of halfway competent blackguards, I'll say that, but you did make a few errors, you know."

"What have you done to her?"

"Gently, Mr. Kuryakin, you'll only hurt yourself if you struggle. I used a drug. It has various names. Thiopentone sodium is the official one, I believe. You'd know it as Pentothal. The truth drug? It's not, of course, but it does make people talk. It is also lethal in an overdose, as is almost any barbiturate. She'll die soon, just as you will. When I'm ready. In the meantime, shall we talk?"

"It won't do you any good!" Solo growled. "No deals!"

"Certainly not!" Beeman smiled genially. "That sort of thing happens only in books. But I enjoy a good talk, you know. For instance, when my faithful Rambo informed me he had caught two intruders, and their descriptions with those of the two men my Mr. Green was planning to remove with the aid of Miss Thompson—and Miss Thompson was there dancing with me—you know, it was very easy to add up."

"It wouldn't be the first time somebody has tried to get rid of us."

"That doesn't surprise me either, Mr. Solo. You seem professionals. You know, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that you serve U.N.C.L.E., or Thrush, or some other similar organization."

"And you don't care which?"

“Not in the least. I have this, you see!” and he held up a palmful of the small black chips of crystal.

“Those aren’t the Gorchak stones!”

“They aren’t, indeed, Mr. Kuryakin. Shrewd of you.”

“Common sense, Beeman. No man could handle those the way you do and stay sane.”

“Quite so. No, these are duplicates. Exact copies of each piece but in inert plastic. Gorchak was a genius, you know. These pieces fit to form a perfect cube, and each one is different. There is only one right way. I wonder if you can imagine just how many wrong ways there are?”

“Factorial twenty seven,” Kuryakin said promptly. “An enormous number, so big it would take several lifetimes to run through.”

Beeman’s hand clenched suddenly on the black pieces. “Nevertheless”—his orotund voice hardened—“I shall solve it, with these, first. Because I have the Gorchak stones, you see. Never mind, that can’t concern you.”

Solo shifted cautiously, trying his bonds and the effort made him sweat. His hands were tied at his back, and his arms were aching numbly.

“Bodies are a nuisance,” Beeman said, and Solo wanted to agree. “It is a hobby of mine to imagine various problems ahead of time and work out solutions in readiness. This is one for which I have several solutions, and I am about to— ah!” He broke off as a ringing noise sounded. Diving one hand into a drawer he produced a telephone.

“Wendig? Good, found you at last. Of course it’s late. You’ve had to leave a party? My dear man, you wouldn’t believe it if I told you the entertainment I have had to abandon this night. Listen, now. The last time I passed the Moorside Estate I think you were on the fifteenth floor? On the second block, yes. Wendig, did it ever strike you that the human body, laid flat, is less than eighteen inches thick? And those floors you are putting in are that thickness, aren’t they?” He listened, smiling, to the chatter from the other end.

“Quite right. And so permanent, don’t you agree? Good. How soon can you be at the site? Very well. Two of my men will deliver three—er—packages to you at that time and remain to assist. I think you will agree that we don’t want too many eyes involved? Good!” He waited, touched a button at the base of the instrument, then put it to his ear again.

“Hopwell? Get the small van and bring it around to the rear, and send Rambo to me. I have a job for you both.” He put the instrument back in the drawer and leaned back comfortably.

“You see, gentlemen, the virtues of planning? Wendig is the construction foreman of a firm that I own. I am building several blocks of very fine dwellings on the Moorside Estate, very cheaply too. You are about to become part of them, permanently. Ah, Rambo.”

“Something you want doing, Chief?”

“Yes. You know the Moorside Estate?”

“Yah. Buildings about twenty miles off, back up the road.”

“Right. Now, you and Hopwell will take these two and the girl, put each one in a sack, tied and roped, inside and out. In the small van, and deliver them to that site. You will meet a man there. You will help him lay a floor of concrete.”

“Do we kill them first?”

Solo held his breath while Beeman deliberated carefully, his eyes half-closed. “I am not a sadist, you know. Can’t afford to be. Emotional values are dangerous in planning. But I will admit there is something very appealing in the thought of you two lying there helpless while the concrete settles and sets around you. And I owe myself that much, for the two dogs. They were valuable dogs. Pets. No, Rambo, don’t kill them. Just wrap them up well and deliver them as instructed.”

A heavy hand descended on Solo’s shoulder, shifted its grip to the scruff of his neck. He saw Illya’s head come to meet his own, and again there was that flashing light. And darkness. He was vaguely aware of being half-carried, half-dragged into a small room ablaze with light. There was a smell compounded of stale beer, frying, hot metal, and tea. He dropped to his knees as Rambo released him. He struggled to stay conscious, squinted painfully up at a tall, lean man in dark trousers and a gaudy sports jacket, a man who grinned evilly down at him and went right on slapping his palm with a flexible leather thing that sounded solid.

“You’re a tough nut, cobber. If it comes to a next time I’ll have to give you the full treatment.”

“Ain’t going to be no next time, Hoppy, not for these fellers. We got some old potato sacks? Gotta wrap the lot of them up and deliver them for burial.” Hopwell came back, after a moment, frowning.

“Two. That’s all there is.”

“Don’t matter. We can put two of ‘em in one sack easy enough. Give me a hand, will you?” Solo’s wits were unscrambling a little now, enough to show him that Louise lay in a corner on the tiled floor, like a discarded doll. She was very still. Beeman, evidently, had an economical mind. He had recovered the glamorous ball gown. Solo shivered as he watched the indifferent pair grab Illya and stuff him into a filthy sack, to whip a noose about the top and extend the lashings all the way down, firmly. Then it was his turn. Rambo stooped, caught up Louise’s sprawling body and dumped it on the floor roughly. A shove of his huge hand sent Solo flat beside it.

“You’re lucky, man! I should hope to have that kind of company when it comes to my turn to die!” Rambo laughed hugely as he clamped Solo firmly against the inert girl so that Hopwell could apply more rope. Then he was hoisted bodily and slid into the sack. It was ancient, dusty, and the smell was unbelievable, so powerful that he passed out again. The next thing he knew was the agonizing shock of being dropped onto a hard and unyielding surface with Louise’s weight on top of him.

The floor of the truck was hard and equipped with painful bumps that took their toll as the truck heeled around a corner before striking the road. Solo knew he had only the scantiest chance of ever seeing daylight and fresh air again. Hopwell had put plenty of muscle into the roping, and Louise was no help. He squirmed desperately, begging her pardon silently for being rough but intent on getting his hands close enough together so that he might reach the knife that was stuck to his right forearm. The only way was to hug her tight, and she was a buxom girl. The truck took another bend violently, and he rolled, cracking his head on the hard floor, but the jar had helped. He gripped his own fingers, heaved savagely, got his fingertips to the haft of the knife and breathed all the way out so that he could gain an extra inch. Then he had it. Seconds more and the nearest rope was in pieces. Hauling back, he slit the sack enough to get his nostrils to the gap and suck in a much needed breath. He didn’t know whether he was being observed or not, and this was no time to worry. He enjoyed the breath, then used the knife fast, got himself out of the sack, and was able to look around.

The truck was empty of everything but a spare fuel can and the bodies. The back wall was blank. The twin doors had tiny windows. He peered out just in time to see the main road intersection slip backward into the night. He knew where he was now, for what good that was. Turning to the other

sack, he got busy with the knife and had Illya free. The Russian agent was barely conscious, his eyes glazed.

Solo went back to his vantage point by the small windows, sparing only a moment to grab a sack and spread it, not very effectively, over Louise's nude body. "Got to get you to a doctor," he mumbled, "among other things. Got a lot to do and nothing to do it with."

Kuryakin sat up weakly. The truck swung into another sharp curve, and he rolled over again, grunting painfully. Through the windows Solo saw a high wire fence and then the scattered debris of construction, the tall gray ghosts of buildings. The truck halted, began to back up and around, and he saw double gates standing open. Just beyond were the low roofed sheds of temporary offices and haphazard piles of girder strip and wooden boxes. On beyond those again stood the gaunt white bulk of multistory block, and beside it the fragile looking skeleton frame of a monotower crane. The truck shuddered to a stop. Solo tensed as he heard doors slam at the front of the truck and then Rambo's giant voice.

"You be dragging one out, Hoppy, while I talk to this feller, see what he wants us to do."

Kuryakin sat up, groaning, and Solo hissed him to silence urgently, listening to the approaching footsteps. He gathered himself by the door, and as it clicked and swung open for Hopwell to lean in, he struck, hard and savage, with both hands and all his might. Hat, head and shoulders went down with a crack against the steel stripped floor; then Solo leaped catlike right over him and turned to do what battle he could. But there was no need. One touch of the sagging body told him that.

"What now, Napoleon?"

"What else? It's crazy, but I'll have to play it by ear. Give me a hand to get his jacket off and then we'll stuff him in the sack."

Within minutes Hopwell's body was roped, and Solo, with the hat jammed on his head and the garish jacket in place, stooped and took hold. "I'll deliver this. You follow up, stay out of sight until we get an idea going. Right?"

He got a good grip, hoisted, grunted with the strain, and went plodding away with Hopwell's limpness sagging over his shoulders and his head well tucked down to avoid recognition. He heard, now, a high pitched squealing voice that had to be Wendig. He sounded Welsh and bad tempered.

“Only two of you? What does that fat fool think I am, a magician? Who’s going to take the crane?”

“I can handle that bit,” answered Rambo. “Done it before.”

“All right, get going! Is that it?”

Solo staggered close, spun round to peer, saw Rambo striding away to the foot of the crane, met the bright little eyes of the foreman staring.

“This is one of them, yes.” He stooped and let the sacked body fall to the ground, and stretched up gratefully. “Now what?”

“Hmm! I can’t do six different things at once, can I? You know how to feed a mixer?”

“Sorry, no idea.”

“That’s a great help you are, then. Hell!” Wendig swung around, his face screwing up into a scowl. “I’ll have to do that bit myself. Hey!” He put his head back and squealed up into the darkness. “You let the hooks down here, right away!” He spun around again. “You stay there a minute.” Seconds later two spotlights flared into life, aimed up at the building and the crane. Wendig came back, striking a switch that set the mixer grinding loudly.

“You’ll have to go up with the hooks,” he said, “and that!”

“I what?” Solo stared at him, “You must be joking!”

“Damn and blast it, man!” Wendig squealed furiously. “I haven’t got the time for playing about. I haven’t got six arms, see? I have to make the mix, all ready. Your mate is on the crane. Somebody has to ride up there with that and disconnect it so that the hooks can come back down for the next one. I can go and get that, easily enough, as soon as I’ve got a mix going. But somebody has got to go with the hooks. You!”

Solo gulped, stared up at the looming building. Black rectangles of windows stared at him blindly from gray walls festooned with a spider web of scaffolding. He shifted his gaze to the unlikely frailty of the crane, with the great jib stretching out and the cluster of concrete blocks at the other end to balance the weight. He swallowed again as out of the gloom came two massive and grit crusted hooks on the end of twin chains. The chains and hooks fell swiftly, swayed toward him, then halted a moment, to drop the last few feet and sprawl right alongside the sack.

“All right?” Wendig demanded. “Up you go, then!” Unwillingly, but unable to see any way out of it, Solo stooped and grabbed the gritty hooks,

jamming them under the rope loops, wide apart. Reluctantly he set his feet by them, clutched the chains, and heard Wendig shriek out.

“Hey, up there! You take him up nice and steady, now. Put him down by that stair well, all right?”

Rambo’s reply was a monstrous bellow of laughter. The links came taut, and Solo groaned as his weight grew large and the sagging burden lifted and buckled. He clung frantically, watching the ground fall away. The gray face of the building slid down and past like a nightmare. Then, with added height, the unfinished top of the building was below him, a pattern in stark black and white like some scene from an abstracted hell. The upward surge stopped abruptly, and, all at once Solo was weightless as the load ran down and the pockmarked surface there seemed to leap up.

He came to a spinning, swinging halt about a foot above the surface, drew a deep breath, and then Rambo let him go, let him fall the last short bit with a bone shaking thud. He crashed, pitched forward, put up his arms to save himself, rolled to the edge of a patch of black shadow, hung there for one awful second, then tumbled over. The drop was no more than three feet but it was enough to shock him and rasp his elbows and knees into agony. The crane whirred again, and here came the sack, slithering and sliding, to fall into the hole with him, knocking him staggering again. Once more Rambo laughed.

“Cast her off, Hoppy. Want them hooks for the next one.” Solo squinted up under the brim of the hat, up at the spidery structure of the tower and the jib, until his eyes found the cab with its windows, no more than ten feet down from the cross member which carried the jib. He got a glimpse of Rambo’s face and toothy grin. He fumed inwardly, turned, and caught his foot in what appeared to be a U shaped length of stout steel rod. Crouching, he investigated and found it was solidly rooted in the previous layer. He turned to fumble with the limp sack, disengaged a hook, slipped it under the U piece and over, linking the beak into the chain itself. A moment later he had done the same with the other one. All in the dark. Rambo couldn’t see. He stood cautiously, backed away, then made a sign, threw his hand up in the air—and prayed that Rambo would be as heavy handed as before.

He heard the motors howl, saw the chains snap taut—and sing! And then grate against an impossible strain. Up there the motors screeched up into overload and then beyond into destruction before the safety cutouts could save them. Solo stared up in fascination as the long jib bowed down,

its cables quivering and lashing, the cluster of counterweights at the other end dancing lazily upward. And then down again. Time seemed to congeal into a crawl. Rambo shouted in fury. The cables lashed and spoke like huge harpstrings. The spindly monotower whipped, sighed, groaned and then gave off a crack like a cannon. And buckled. And fell, snapping like a carrot at its weakest point, just below the cabin.

Solo shrank, wrapped his arms about his head and fell flat on his face, half-stunned by the gargantuan scream and cry of destruction, cringing from the infernal barrage of shearing, bursting nuts and bolts. Under him the concrete shook as the jib, canting sideways, slammed into the top of the building.

Daring to peer up, Solo saw the twisted framework of the tower immediately above him. There came the squeal and spang of some strip of metal driven to destruction, and a bulleting rivet head smashed into the concrete in front of his face, struck a trail of sparks, and wailed away into the night. Then the silence rushed in, thick and cold.

TWELVE

IT WAS QUIET. Too quiet. Beyond the ringing in his head, Solo could hear the stillness. He scrambled up, heaving away the metal bar across his back. What a hell of a mess! He drew a deep breath, spat out some stone dust, set off to wander drunkenly to the edge of the surface, tripping and stumbling over chunks of wood, treacherous loops and hooks of wire, odd split levels in the concrete, and he came to a fragile looking barrier of scaffold tubing. He clung and craned over, stared down.

Still it was quiet. Away down there among the toy-sized objects he saw three spreading triangles, the yellow of sand, red of gravel and white of cement, and the tiny red mixer at their common focus. But it was still and silent. Perhaps Wendig had gone away! Solo pondered that a moment, his brain lurching loosely around in his skull. Turning, his eye caught a glint of light. Up there. A window swinging in the breeze. The crane cabin! What about Rambo? Solo aimed himself at the spot where the great box column of the crane leaned against the roof and started towards it.

Just here the scaffolding had been warped and smashed aside. He picked his way around it, leaned out and laid his hand on the main angle steel.

“Climb up,” he told himself. “Got to check up. Make sure. Finish it off properly.” He nodded at this sound piece of reasoning and had to take hold of his head to stop the nodding from going on indefinitely. He wiped his hands on his trousers, took hold, and started to climb. After the first strain, it was simple enough. All he had to do was to lean on the girder, stretch out, hold, bring up his feet, stretch out again. Engrossed in this, he suddenly realized that something was moving besides himself on the flat concrete, and he held still to watch, frowning gently.

It was Wendig. The thick chested bare headed foreman seemed to come from nowhere, out of a dark shadow. He glared around savagely, twisted back for a look up at the wreckage, ran heavily out into an open area and swore. After a string of profanity that made Solo shake his head, he stooped and caught up an eight foot length of aluminum pole.

“Where the hell are you?” he demanded. “Where?”

Before Solo could decide whether to reply, another shadow came out into the light on Wendig's heels. This one had a shock of fair hair that was almost white in the floodlights, had dirt and sweat on its face, white dust down the side of its sweater and pants, and it stood still now, panting and watching Wendig. Solo stared, then grinned delightedly.

"Why, there's Illya!" he murmured, went to lift a hand to wave and the movement almost dislodged him from his perch. He clutched again, tight.

"You calling me?" Kuryakin said, and Wendig spun around. "Who the hell are you?"

"One of the people you were going to bury in concrete."

The burly foreman froze for just one breath, then launched himself in murderous attack, moving fast, swinging the metal tube. Kuryakin ducked and fell aside, lashed out with a foot, and Wendig plunged on, full tilt, into a concrete edge. Squealing, he turned and came back. Kuryakin ran heavily across the open flat and stooped to grab a length of some thing to use as a weapon. Wendig tore after him, hoisted his tube and hammered down with it. Kuryakin met it, fended it, and the short length of timber he had found shattered and broke, and he went down and back from a numbing blow on his shoulder. Wendig squealed again, charged in, hammered down, and the metal tube clanged on the concrete as his target rolled frantically out of the way.

The foreman was thickset and enraged but nimble on his feet. He came around again, crouched a moment, then charged, but now he was learning caution. This time he wielded the scaffold tube at waist level like a stout spear. Kuryakin backed away cautiously, then deliberately came forward and grabbed the thrusting end and hung on. Wendig heaved back, snorting. Kuryakin set his feet, but he was outclassed for weight. Wendig dragged him, shaking the tube furiously. All at once Kuryakin reversed his tactics, shoved forward violently, and Wendig went tottering back, completely off-balance, falling and unable to regain stability because Kuryakin was shoving. A frantic look over his shoulder told him the end was near, the edge of the building very close. With a squeal he threw away the pole, scrabbling to check his fall. Kuryakin tried to brake too, but too late. The pole clanged aside. Solo saw the pair of them clump together in a tangle of clutching arms and go to the brink in a crazy waltz.

They struck a scaffold pole fence, and it creaked, yielded, and then Wendig was going—up in the air and over— screaming as he fell out of

sight. Kuryakin went over too, until his legs, desperately crooked, caught at the pole and he hung there, swinging. Just for a moment; then he grabbed upward with one hand, then the other, heaved and writhed and managed to get himself upright. Then, with a convulsive leap, he flung himself back on to the safety of the concrete, staggered forward, and went down on his hands and knees.

Solo nodded to himself happily, then remembered his own errand. He looked up. Got to fix Rambo. Not far, now. He began to climb again. The girder gave way to locking plates, then another girder, and then the base of the cabin. A door, but it was shut, and it would have meant forsaking the girder and launching out into the emptiness in the middle of the square. So Solo decided against that, decided instead to go on up the outside and look into the swinging window. He applied his abraded fingers with care, heaved until his head came up level with the dark opening, and peered in. Breathing. A grunt. Then a huge hand on the end of an arm like a beam came out of the dark and took him by the throat.

“Waited for you,” a deep chested voice growled. “Heard you coming up the steel. Got you now, mister!”

Solo tried to shake his neck free and the pressure went on until he felt his face going blue. Blood pounded in his head, and his lungs ached.

“You done me, mister. I’m all smashed up inside. But you’re going with me. We is going to sing Hallelujah together, you and me!”

That grip was evidence that Rambo meant every word. Solo had no free hands to tackle it. He was suspended on the underside of an angle. To let go meant to fall. His wits churned. If he didn’t let go and do something he was dead anyway. His lungs were bursting. Far away, over the thunder, he heard a voice.

“Napoleon, what are you doing up there?”

There was nothing else to do. He let go both hands, clamped them on the massive arm that was choking the life out of him and let his whole weight fall on Rambo’s arm. Something had to go. Something did. He felt himself go sluggishly backward and then down, caught a glimpse of a dark face, gleaming teeth and staring eyes as Rambo was dragged bodily out of the window. And then he fell. The white concrete came up to meet him, and he had one brief flash of Illya’s amazed stare, directly below. Then the smash of impact and merciful darkness.

This time I'm ready dead, he thought. *It's happened at last!* and there was a certain sadness about it. But not for long. Aches began to report themselves, from his hands, his knees, the small of his back and his throat, and he sighed and decided there was nothing else to do but to wake up and start all over again. He stirred, tried to raise himself, and there was an arm across his neck. Rambo's arm, but Rambo would never need it again. He struggled free, sat up, worked his head and neck gingerly and saw Illya near by, curled up and sleeping soundly.

"Hoy!" He reached over and shook, firmly. "Can't sleep here!"

"Not sleeping. Dying. Look." Kuryakin opened one eye accusingly. "Next time you hurl yourself off somewhere, shout a warning, eh?"

"Should know better, man like you. Never stand right under. Always back off a little. Anyway, can't die here, up in the air. Got to go down."

"How?"

"You came up," Solo reasoned. "So must be possible to go down again. Come on, show me."

Kuryakin stirred, sat up stiffly, managed to get to his feet on the third try and stood looking down. "Come on, then!"

"Oh!" Solo realized he was still sitting, put out a hand, shoved the inert bulk of Rambo's shoulder carefully aside and made it to his feet. He waved Illya to lead on, and all at once his mind became pinpoint clear, completely detached from his battered body. Hopwell, gone. Wendig, gone. Rambo, gone. Who was left? He thought carefully while his automatic arms and legs descended a stairwell into gloom, down, and around, and down, and around, moving in blackness, into the glare from windows and into blackness again. Who now? Well, there was still Green. And Beeman. Somebody else. Groping, he came up with the name Louise, remembered who she was and that started something else to mind. The small truck. Sacks. He watched his shambling form come out on to the level, into the reflected glare from the lights, and urged himself to get with it again.

"Illya," he said, catching up with his guide. "The little truck. That way." He pointed with an arm that seemed curiously bent, but Illya understood and nodded. They plodded on, up to the open gates and the truck. They peered inside.

"Got to get her out," Solo decided, and between them they managed to drag out the unconscious girl and struggle with her around to the front, where they piled her into the driving seat.

“She can’t drive, Napoleon.”

“Certainly not. We have to do that. Got the keys?”

They were still in the ignition. Somehow they managed to scramble in, Solo at the wheel and Kuryakin supporting Louise’s limp figure. They got moving along the road. After what seemed an age they approached a familiar sign post. Solo peered up at it and nodded. The plan was crystal clear in his mind. They ran on across the highway and into the long, curving lesser road.

“Keep a lookout, Illya. Beeman’s place. Down there some where. Got a little—little gift for him. Sort of a surprise.”

“All right. There it is now, down there.”

Solo dragged at the wheel, grunted as the front wheels dropped into the ditch and up, then killed the engine. “Plan,” he said, enunciating very carefully. “Like we did be fore, remember? Down the hill, and boom?”

“I remember.” Illya nodded, and chuckled. “Boom! Good!” They fell out on either side, struggled to drag Louise clear, and Solo staggered around to the back, where the doors were flapping open. It seemed urgent that he first cheek whether there was anything inside. As he put out a hand to grope, he noticed the sleeve on his own arm. Hopwell’s jacket. He didn’t need that any longer. He fell down as he tried to drag it off. Getting up again he saw Kuryakin watching him curiously. He grinned, tugged at a sleeve again, and there was a rattle from one pocket. Matches.

“Spare can of gas in there. You follow me, Illya?”

“Absolutely. Get it out.”

It was a task, getting the cap off, but they managed it. Solo held, while Kuryakin poured, then tossed the can into the back.

“Matches now. You go start the engine.”

Solo giggled, shambled around, climbed in, twisted the key and the engine caught. He craned out to peer back.

Kuryakin struck a match, waved it near the jacket, and it caught with a whoosh that singed him. He threw it hastily, slammed the doors.

“Go away!” he shouted, and Solo let the clutch in. The truck bucked up over the edge of the grass. Solo fell out, rolled, clutched grass, sat up and watched as Kuryakin slid to a stop beside him. The truck plunged on and down, bumping and lurching, gathering speed, struck a steeper part, surged, hit a shelf and leaped out into the dark. At that moment the back doors burst open to gush out leaping yellow flames. Down and down, and it landed

solid and square, right in the middle of a glassed in sun dome on that house down there. The spout of flames and the hideous crash that reverberated back were extremely satisfying.

“Bull’s-eye!” declared Solo. “With the compliments of Mary Chantry, Louise Thompson, Illya Kuryakin and yours sincerely, Napoleon Solo!”

“Good speech! Can we go home now, Napoleon?”

“That’s a very good idea, Illya. Go home. Got a little car here somewhere. Lovely little car. Goes like a bomb!” That struck him as exceedingly witty, and he was still chuckling over it as they fought their way up the hillside, collected Louise’s lifeless body, and sought out their own car from its hiding place among the bushes. They stretched her out in the back seat and scrambled into the front. Solo found the keys, pressed the starter, and the engine came to life. He straightened, fumbled with pedals and gear lever, pawed the panel until the lights came on, then aimed for the road, and they were off.

“Got to get Louise to a doctor,” he declared. “She’s sick. Everybody’s sick. Need help.” There was no response. Kuryakin leaned back and lolled with his eyes closed, wearing a smile of bliss. Solo snorted, put his attention on the road again. The headlights seemed bent, and the road twisted crazily from one side to the other as he tried to follow it.

“All crooked,” he sighed. “All of it. That’s the trouble with everything. All twisted up.” Again he had a flash of that knife edge clarity, his mind retreating from the crazy world of corkscrew roads, and sinuous headlight beams. *Going home. But*, he argued, *where home? Which way? Need help. But who? Mustn’t tell U.N.C.L.E*. He was certain of that. *So who*? A name knocked at the door of his mind. He let it in. Nan. Nan Perrell. Lovely girl. He fastened onto that thought, worked at it until it was clear, then peered, through the rainbow windshield again. Somehow he had left the road and was on a switchback. But there was a familiar corner. And there, just ahead, was a call box shining in the dark. Sanity struck through the delirium. He leaned his head against the cold glass of the screen, and the chill was wonderful. He sat up, eased over to the side of the road and stopped, stared at the call box. Call for help. He scrambled out, fumbled at the door, stumbled inside. Sixpence. He groped, got one out and ready. Then he dug down through the muddled layers of memory until he found the number she had told him. He lifted the receiver and dialed. There came a double-buzz,

and again, then a click and a rapid chittering. He aimed the sixpence for the slot as he heard a male voice state:

"Miss Perrell's residence. Who is calling, please?"

"Solo here," he mumbled, as the chittering stopped. "Speak to Miss Perrell, please."

"One moment," the voice requested, and then came a shrill, acid edged voice.

"Mr. Solo! Do you know it's four-fifteen! In the morning!"

"Ah, Nan! Bit of trouble. Need help."

"And you are stoned, by the sound of it. How dare you, getting me out of bed at this hour! I suppose you think it's funny—"

"Not funny, no. Apologize for bothering you. Need help—"

"My God!" Her tone switched abruptly. "You're hurt. Where are you? Stay put and I'll come and get you."

"No need. Not far away. Just 'round the corner. Be there—five minutes. Sorry—couldn't think of anybody else."

He hung up, noting amazedly that the call box had now righted itself. He walked back to the car holding his head well back. The road had changed its tactics now, had be come fluid, squirming and twisting as if to dodge out from under his wheels, but he held on to it grimly until he saw a familiar gate post, and swerved to graze past it. Without quite believing it, he cut the engine and rolled to a stop close by her Princess. He leaned on the door, got it open and reeled out just as a flood of light came from the entrance, and there she was all in blue satin and running to catch him. He fended her off feebly.

"In the back," he mumbled. "Girl. Louise Thompson. Overdose of pentothal, to make her talk. Needs a doctor."

"All right, take it as read. Curtis, take that car, just as it is, to the hospital. I'll ring and warn them you're coming, they'll know what to do. Come on, you. And you," as Kuryakin came walking out of the dark with his eyes only half-open. "Lean on me."

It seemed to Solo that he drifted, his feet barely touched the ground. They reached the glaring light of the hallway, and she caught her breath.

"God in heaven, where have you two been? Strikes me you're the ones who need to go to the hospital."

"No need to make a fuss," Kuryakin mumbled. "Just a little scrap."

“With what, a bulldozer? Come on, the first thing you both need is a hot bath.” She swept them forward and up the stairs.

“Smell nice,” Solo murmured.

“I hope you mean me, because I’m damned if you do.” She dragged them into the bathroom, set water gushing, lowered the two men to the floor. “Be getting undressed while I phone.” She was back before Solo had struggled out of his sweater. She took hold of Kuryakin, who had gone peacefully to sleep on the tiled floor. “Anyone would think you two had crawled through every gutter for ten miles around. Maybe you have.” She undressed the passive Russian expertly, diagnosing as she went. “Bang on the head. Lump like an egg and split scalp. Shoulder bruises, look like iron bar marks. Rope burns. Teeth marks! You have had a time, haven’t you?” She hoisted efficiently and dropped Kuryakin into the water. He came to life with a yell and clutched the side. She turned on Solo.

“You next!”

“I can manage on my own!”

“You can? By trying to get your head out through an armhole? Don’t be so blasted pigheaded. You called for help, didn’t you? All right, then, let me help!” She came at him, took charge, pulled and heaved and finally got him into the bath along with his companion. “You’ve been tied up, too, and bashed and chewed by wild beasts. What did you do, tangle with a circus or something?”

She went away and came back with an armful of big white towels, tossed them to the floor, twirled out of her blue satin and caught up one towel to wrap round her waist like an apron. She found bottles and laced the water with their contents, creating an odor of pine and disinfectant. She got a cake of pink soap, a wash cloth, a portable shower head which she attached to the taps, and she started to scrub and drench them until they were clean.

By the time she was finished scrubbing, dousing them with antiseptics, investigating their wounds, and the hot water was running out, and she could hose them down with cold, the two men were almost normal again.

“Right.” She shut off the spray. “Dry yourselves, put those towel robes on, and come into the bedroom when you’re ready. I’ll have brandy and coffee for you.”

Curtis was just going out as they entered. “Glad to see you’re not much the worse,” he said, and Solo grinned wearily.

“We’ll live, I think. How is Louise?”

“They said it was all right, sir, they were in time.”

“That’s good. She did us a very big favor. I’d hate to think anything would happen to her on our account.”

“You had quite a night, by the look of it.” Curtis looked almost envious. “How many men did you have to kill to get that lot?”

Kuryakin frowned in thought. Nan Perrell, coming up by his shoulder, stared at the two men wide eyed. “Let’s see, there was Louise’s three first. Napoleon, right?”

“Right. And then Hopwell, Wendig, and Rambo. Say six, at least, and maybe one or two more, we don’t know yet.”

“My God, you’re not joking, either. Six! This I want to hear. All right, Curtis, you can turn in now.”

“Yes, miss. I’ll take the clothing from the bathroom. Six!”

He went away humming gently to himself. She led them into the bedroom, made them climb in under the sheets while she busied herself with coffee cups, then sat herself on a low stool between the two beds while they sipped at hot coffee generously laced with brandy.

“All right,” she declared, “now talk. I want to know it all. Who, for one thing, was that girl? I’ve seen her before, haven’t I?”

“Louise Thompson,” Solo explained. “The leak in Barnett’s office. Your friend Charles had her moved, and her boss didn’t care for that. So he laid a trap for us.” He went on to tell, without frills, just what had happened in the villa, and she sat quite still, stern faced, until be was done.

“You see,” Kuryakin took up the tale, “once we knew she was going to be at the Danby affair, we knew we had a chance to spot him. The big chief himself. Louise helped us.”

“You let her. But you wouldn’t let me. You went expecting to meet the big man and never said a word to me about it.”

“You weren’t exactly in the mood, were you?” Solo retorted. “I don’t know exactly what you were thinking about when we left here so fast, but it wasn’t anything to do with crooks.”

She turned rosy pink but met his eyes bravely.

“You might not have believed us,” Kuryakin added. “And we had was Louise’s word and the memory of the voice we heard on the tape.”

“I would have believed you!”

“Would you? An old friend of the family? Henry Beeman?”

The pink ebbed from her face. “Uncle Henry? Are you absolutely sure?”

“See what we mean?” Solo demanded. “Of course we’re sure, now!” And he went on to tell her why. Again without frills or heroics, just the facts. “After we bombed him out with that truck we didn’t stay to investigate more. I’m afraid we made a mess of the whole thing.”

“Made a mess of them, you mean!” Her voice was savage. “Don’t you worry, this will be reported and dealt with. You can relax. Here, you’re to take one of these, each.” She passed them tablets and watched while they swallowed, finished their coffee.

“And now”—she stood, moved to the bed end gap between them—“about me. You’ve made something of a mess of me, too, and it’s high time I admitted it. No, let me finish this, just to clear my conscience.” She put hands to her robe, stripped it off, stood defiantly before them, “With this I have broken men, made fools of them. Then you two came and showed me what a fool I am. I made a sort of vow, you know, that if and when I ever met a man who could beat me, he could have me. And it never occurred to me for one minute that he wouldn’t want me. As I say, I’m a fool.”

“No, hold it.” Kuryakin struggled to sit up. “You’ve got that all wrong, Nan. You haven’t lost anything. If you had beaten me or Napoleon, you wouldn’t have won anything. That doesn’t prove a thing. Take Rambo, for instance. He could have broken me and Napoleon in half, by himself!”

“Damn near did, too!” Solo grinned ruefully. “Thing is, if you have a job to do, you do it the best way you can. And when you need help, you call for it, if there is any. Like I did, when I called you. You’re on our side.”

She frowned at him as if seeking some hidden meaning.

“We’re all equal,” Kuryakin said, “only some get the chance to be more equal than others. That’s Orwell, but Dumas put it different. All for one and one for all. Remember?”

“Man to man?” she whispered, and Solo grinned.

“While you’re standing there like that it’s hard to believe, but that is exactly what we do mean. Good companions!”

All at once the medicinal drug seemed to hit him. Through a warm haze he saw her smile—and surely those were tears in her eyes?—then come near to bend over him, to brush his cheek with her lips.

“I’m honored,” she whispered. “Go to sleep now.”

THIRTEEN

SOLO FELT gloriously, immensely comfortable, just like being in a soft, warm bed. He *was* in bed. Someone had left the light on. He stirred, and all his comfort disappeared in the creaking remembrance of stiff joints and sinews. He opened an eye, levered his arm into place, looked at the time. One-forty-five. He did a double take. One-forty-five? And the sun was shining? He sat up, winced, then looked across at Illya, who was still far away. He crawled out, found the pants and sweater of the previous night had been meticulously brushed and arranged by his bed. He shook Illya.

"Come on!" he reproached. "It's afternoon!"

They made it stiffly to the bathroom and then downstairs. Curtis came to attend them gravely.

"Why didn't somebody call us?"

"You needed the rest, sir. Miss Perrell gave instructions you were to be left sleeping. She went off early this morning, saying she would very likely be home for lunch. That could be whenever you're ready. And the hospital rang. Miss Thompson is conscious, quite well, but rather weak. They have questions to ask."

"I'll bet they have. This is where the awkward bit will start. We had better eat, Illya, and try thinking up a good story for the doctors."

"There was this for you, sir, also." Curtis produced a slim envelope. On it, in black angular script, were the words Solo and Kuryakin. "It was delivered by hand, just a few minutes ago.

Solo thumbed the flap open, drew out the once-folded sheet of heavy glazed paper. That same angular script stared at him, beginning without any preamble or greeting.

I have Miss Perrell. I would rather have you two. I am prepared to consider an exchange, on my terms, means, and conditions. I will look for your (discreet) advertisement in The Times *to that effect on Friday next. Failing its appearance I will send you by mail, the fingers of her right hand to stimulate your decision.*

It was signed *H.B.*

“Read that, Illya, and forget about lunch. When did Miss Perrell go out, Curtis?”

“There was a telephone call at seven-thirty. She left almost immediately afterwards. Is anything wrong, sir?”

“Plenty. The boy we tangled with last night has got her now. Where is the nearest phone?”

It was in the hall. He grabbed it, dialed the number she bad given him—it seemed a lifetime ago. The phone purred; then he heard the familiar voice. “Charles. What is it?”

“Solo here. They’ve got Nan Perrell.”

“Who’s they? And how?”

“Speaking from her home. She went out around seven-thirty this A.M. and a message was just delivered, by hand, addressed to me and Illya. I’ll read it to you.” Kuryakin came to put it in his hand. He read the stark words carefully. There was a moment’s pause.

“Who the devil is H.B.?”

“She should have reported that. Greasy voice, on the tape. Henry Beeman. Family friend and lives not too far away.”

“But he won’t be there. Nor will she!”

“That’s a safe bet.”

“Advertisement in *The Times* by Friday. Doesn’t give us long.”

“Leave that to you. Too long for us.” Solo bit the words off, felt a touch on his arm and Kuryakin coming close to whisper.

“No point in charging off at random, Solo,” cautioned Charles.

“Not going to. I know where she is.” Kuryakin had whispered it. “So far as he knows, we do not know he owns that yacht, so that is it. That’s where she is. Agree?”

“I think that’s valid.”

“Right. Then we’ll go and get him.”

“Which is precisely what he wants you to do.”

“Maybe, but not right away. He won’t be expecting anything, not for some time. We can catch him bending.”

“I think that’s valid too. Good. You need Barnett. Get over to him as quick as you can. Whatever you want, just ask. He’ll deliver, I’ll see to that. Get her back, Solo. I don’t give a damn how!”

“Well try!” Solo hung up and saw Kuryakin swipe a couple of apples from a bowl. “Grab a few for me and come on. Keep your fingers crossed,

Curtis."

The little Mini got the chance to show its powers as they fled through Norwood and clown the steep slopes into Sydenham and Lewisham. Their map studying paid off in that they were able to strike the most direct route for their purpose.

"Peckham," Kuryakin said, "then Stockwell, Battersea Bridge, and we should have the traffic flow on our side. Do you think we'll get her, Napoleon?"

"No more than you do, Illya. Can you see Beeman honoring any kind of deal? But we have to try."

There had been a change in the internal decor of Admiralty House. Replacing the gorgeousness of Louise there was a leather faced sergeant of Marines who marched them in to Barnett without wasting words. Captain Barnett looked different too.

"Stirred something up this time," he greeted, rising from his desk. "What can I do for you?"

"First off," Solo declared, "we have to locate that yacht."

"Already done." Barnett caught up a signal form, took it across to a wall map, read from it and put out a finger. "Fifty-one-oh-eight north, one-eighteen west. Just below Folkestone, out of Dungeness. That's where she was at thirteen hundred hours. Making up the coast about nine knots."

"Nice work. Now"—he and Kuryakin had worked this out on the way —"what we need is something that can catch her, and something else. One to hold her up while the other sneaks around behind, so we can hop aboard and take a look.

"Hmm!" Barnett scratched his jaw dubiously. "There's a duty destroyer standing by at Harwich will do for the hold up. That's routine. We've had a bit of trouble with illegal entry lately, as you may have heard. But for the other—just a minute!" He strode back to his desk, rummaged among the paper and snatched at one form. "This might be it. Squadron of M.L.s—motor launches—out on exercise at the moment, due in at Parkestone Quay in about an hour and a half."

"Take your word for it. How long will it take us to get to Harwich, starting now?"

"Under four hours, sir," the Marine sergeant spoke up, "With a fast car and a good driver."

"We can lay that on, I think," Barnett offered. "See to it, Chitty."

“Sir!” The sergeant saluted and strode away.

“Four hours!” Kuryakin looked at his watch. “Say six-thirty. Where will *Oberon* be then?”

Back at the map Barnett made brief estimates. “Four hours at nine knots will put her about here, just north of Margate, in the estuary. If you leave Harwich about seven—nineteen hours—you’ll have a couple of hours of daylight. But *Oberon* may run in somewhere for the night.”

“Yes.” Solo scraped his jaw. “This could be tricky. We need to get the drop on her just at dusk. How close can you follow her movements?”

“Put the finger on her any time. Coastguard Shackletons will do that for us.”

“And can you radio that information to the destroyer?”

“Nothing to it.”

As they went out they heard Barnett dictating, “Signal to *Trojan*, Harwich. Rendezvous at nineteen hours at Cork Buoy with M.L.”

“That’s more like the Royal Navy as I’ve heard of it,” Solo murmured, as they went down in the elevator. “They can move when the heat’s on.”

Out in the forecourt, conspicuous among the other vehicles there, stood a large and sleek black Daimler, a pennant drooping from its right front fender and a tiny uniformed Wren sitting at the wheel. Solo stared, went across to it.

“I’m Napoleon Solo,” he said. “Are you waiting for us?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know what’s required?”

“You want to go to Harwich, sir, in a hurry.”

“Fair enough. Come on, Illya. Miss—?”

“Wren Heston, sir.”

“Ah. Yes, well, do you have maps I can look at?’

She reached into a door pocket and produced a flat bundle for him. The two men sat back as the car growled into life and wheeled out into the road. Solo unfolded the map thoughtfully.

“Let’s not give Beeman credit for impossibilities. Say he could snatch Nan within half an hour of her leaving home. Eight A.M. He still has to get her to the yacht. Barnett said she had come out of Dungeness. Let’s find that, first.”

“South coast. Work back from Folkestone.”

“Ah. Yes, there’s an airfield. And there’s one at Croydon. So If Uncle Henry has a private charter plane, he could make it with time to spare.”

He folded the map again, struggling with it as the powerful car swooped to avoid a lesser road user, swung into a major road, and began to roar in earnest.

“Looks like we have a second Stirling Moss here,” he murmured. “I think we’re going to be on time, Illya.”

They were. As they crested the hill just outside Dovercourt and flew down the far side into Parkestone Quay, with the river Stour stretching out beyond, it was fifteen minutes short of six-thirty. They bounced over the level crossings and sighed to a halt on the quayside.

“Much obliged.” Solo stooped to grin at the driver. They moved away, striding along the planking, casting curious eyes over the tied up craft. “That looks like ours.” Kuryakin pointed to where a low lying vessel hugged the woodwork. It was one of three. They approached the gangway and a seaman in jersey and sea boots came to intercept them.

“Looking for M.L. one-oh-four. We’re expected. Solo and Kuryakin.”

“That’s her, the outboard one. Ask for Lieutenant Woods.”

Woods proved to be a chunky youngster with a straggle of beard and a wry grin, with a uniform jacket over his sweater.

“No rest for the wicked,” he said, offering his hand. “I gather you two have something special in mind?”

“You could say that. How quiet are your engines?”

“Motors!” Woods corrected patiently. “Depends what you call quiet. Hold on a bit.” He moved away to the cabin superstructure, spoke into a voice pipe, and came back. “Is this something hush-hush, then?”

“In a way. About those—motors?”

“They’re running now. Did you hear them start up?” Solo, who hadn’t heard or felt a thing, nodded approvingly. “That’s fine. You know about the rendezvous with *Trojan*?”

“Yes. Ready when you are.”

“Let’s go. You’ll hear all about it when we talk to her skipper.”

The commanding officer of *Trojan* was Lieutenant Commander Hope, a tall, lean man with a sad expression. The two agents gathered with him, his first, and Lieutenant Woods, in the destroyer’s tiny wardroom, and Solo put the proposition to them.

"*Oberon*'s a privately owned yacht. The man who owns it on paper is called Green. The real owner, his boss, will also be aboard. A very rich and powerful man, who can— and will, given half a chance—cause trouble. Also aboard is a young woman, very much against her will. Just to give you the right kind of picture, if this is fumbled and the big man gets even a hint that Mr. Kuryakin or myself are involved—too early—she is as good as dead. So what we would like is this. First to find *Oberon*. Ideally, just as it's getting dark. Then, this destroyer closes up on one side and makes a fuss. You know, lights and hailings and talk. While the launch, with us two aboard, sneaks around the other side in the gloom, and we get aboard and take a quick look, before anybody can get rid of the evidence."

"Sounds all right," Hope murmured, "except that I'd like it better if we found *Oberon* in daylight, while we can still see enough to be certain. Then we can lay off until dark and close in. Better than conducting a search in the dark. It's blowing up a bit."

"So long as they don't see us first and take fright."

"They won't. Do you have a script?"

"It would be better if you wrote your own lines," Kuryakin suggested. "They will sound more authentic that way. What we would like is a first class impersonation of a bumbling brass hat going by the rule book. At no time must they suspect that this is anything more than a routine stop and check. Not—repeat not—a search. If they get that idea then the lady is over the side with her throat cut instantly."

"Wouldn't want that." Hope caressed his jaw and looked unhappy. "There's been something of a shake-up lately, with small boats bringing in Pakistanis and the like. That gives us a cover story. We'll work out the rest as we go. How about you, Woods?"

"Looks like a gift, our bit. We keep station with you until you find the yacht; then, just on dusk, we come alongside, pick up you two, and then deliver you to the blind side. Just a point. Is anything likely to go off with a loud bang, or shells, anything like that?"

"Hardly. These people are killers, but they do it quietly."

"All right, let's get moving. Stations for leaving harbor, Number One!" First Lieutenant Willis went away. There came the keening of whistles, shouted commands, the tramp of feet, and the destroyer began to move, to bite a white bone of spray at her bows. A seaman came to conduct Solo and

Kuryakin to the bridge, where Hope stood well back while others did all the operating.

“Full speed,” he told them, “until we sight the beggar, and then we can relax. I’ll have a word with Cox’n Armitage about the performance, and there’ll be no bother there. But I don’t care for your bit, just the two of you. Never know what you might run into.”

“That’s really the point,” Kuryakin explained. “This has no legality at all, so we can’t ask anyone else to take the risk with us.”

“Let me worry about that. I’m responsible too. I’d like to appoint a man to go with you.” The little ship was clear of the river mouth now and nosing into running seas, tossing the spray high over her bows. “No need to hang about here,” Hope decided. “We’ll go below and eat.”

Later, with the inner man properly taken care of, Hope introduced them to a chunky youngster with vast shoulders and a wide grin. “Sub-Lieutenant Walker,” he sighed, “is the navy’s east coast champion at anything that calls for violence, like chucking weights about. Or people.”

“You care for being shot at?” Solo demanded, and the grin stayed.

“Has to be a first time for everything. Count me in.”

There came a messenger from the bridge to say they had a blip on radar that looked like the target they were after, and ten minutes later Hope was able to be positive with the aid of binoculars. “That’s her all right. Now, signalman, flash the M.L. ‘Do not—repeat not—acknowledge by flash. Come alongside, starboard, immediately.’ That’s it, gentlemen. Nothing to do now but wait for dusk. And rehearse a few things.”

FOURTEEN

“LET’S GET One thing straight,” Solo said firmly. He and Kuryakin were huddled in the tiny wheelhouse of the launch alongside Woods, with Sub-Lieutenant Walker on the far side. “You come after us, to pick up any bits we may leave. Don’t stick your neck out. If anybody is to get shot at, it is us, right?” On their port side the gray green bulk of *Trojan* heaved and wallowed in the sea as both vessels crept slowly closer to the target. Woods murmured gently into his voice pipe, regulating the speed by small amounts so that the launch held level with the destroyer but on the blind side. The only light was a feeble glow over the rev counters. All at once a loudspeaker gave voice into the gloom.

“Yacht ahoy. Ahoy there. What ship?”

“That’s us,” Woods murmured, and said into the pipe:

“Half-astern starboard, half-ahead port.” The launch shivered and swung away from the cover of the destroyer’s side, driving into the waves and thumping down on them as she picked up speed. The two agents held on tight, knowing that they were now describing a large circle that would bring them around the stem of that yacht over there and up on her port side. Meanwhile *Trojan* was busy with the performance. Light clusters blazed, all aimed at *Oberon*, and the upper deck was a mass of moving forms. The amplified voice kept hailing, but the breeze whipped away the words. Woods had the motors into full speed now and the launch was lifting like a race horse.

“Rolls-Royce engines?” Kuryakin wondered, and Woods grinned.

“We still call them motors, though. Nice, aren’t they?”

He hauled on the wheel steadily, then cut the speed in half. The gentle shudder died away in inaudibility. “Won’t be long now,” he said. “Better get ready to jump. I’m slowing down.”

They could see *Oberon* now, rapidly looming closer. The launch wallowed, drifted with the sea until it was running parallel and no more than three feet away from the yacht’s side. Three men stood, knees bent,

eyes on the heaving deck edge. The launch sank, rose level—they sprang in unison, grabbed hold and fell forward flat. The launch heeled away into the dark. Out there, broken by the breeze, came the stentorian voice:

"—will send a boarding party. You will drop a gangway, please."

The three rolled urgently together. Walker pointed in the gloom.

"That looks like a cabin superstructure, there."

They rose to their knees, scurried forward with the lurch of the deck, and went down prone again, to listen. Over head a familiar voice sounded on the yacht's bullhorn.

"Good evening. May I ask the meaning of this intrusion? What do you expect to find?"

"That's him!" Solo hissed. "Confirmation, if we needed it." Walker put out a hand to tap his shoulder.

"This one's empty. Try further aft. Ventilators."

They crept, using all the available cover. They heard Hope now and the yarn he had prepared.

"—reason to believe—stolen vessels—used to import illegal immigrants. Intend to inspect your certificates of ownership, logbooks, registration. Formality only, but we have our duty—"

"This looks more like it." Kuryakin snuggled his ear close, plugged the other ear with a finger. Solo did likewise. They heard a voice.

"—said you'd never get away with it, didn't I? And that was Nan Perrell's voice, furious and uncowed.

"My dear lady"—it was Green, definitely—"this interruption is probably fortuitous. For your sake, it had better be. One false move by you and you die instantly"

Walker growled, and Solo tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Easy now," he whispered. "That's just a sample." They went back a bit, to a pair of double doors. Walker shoved them open and hung over, head down, to peer, came up again.

"Companionway. All clear. Down?"

"Down!" Solo muttered, and led the way swiftly. There was no sign of anyone about. He put his head to a doorway. Nothing. On a bit more and another door, and he heard a murmur. Stooping, he could see through a key hole. He saw directly along the polished length of a table. Glasses and bottles, and a wooden framework to support them against the lurching of

the sea, and Green, lounging back against cushions, his head turned to address someone out of sight.

“Take a look,” Solo invited. “That’s the chap we want. Assume he has a gun and will use it. We want to get in there, fast!”

“Let me,” Walker suggested, backing off the width of the corridor. “When ready—I’ll go straight through the door.”

“Right!” Solo nodded. “You keep down. In and down, flat. We will take care of him. On three. One—two—thee!”

Walker launched himself like a thunderbolt, the door bursting and yielding like so much cardboard. Solo went into a flying dive over his bent back, slapped the polished table with both hands and slid swiftly, heedless of the glassware, his hands outstretched and grasping, to get Green by the throat. He grabbed and squeezed furiously, remembering the foulness this gray little man had been responsible for. He was dimly aware of someone else struggling at his side and the table heeling and canting, and then the fury abated a trifle and he slackened some of his grip.

“Got the gun,” Kuryakin grunted, heaving his shoulder against the table edge. “He was holding it in his lap. You can let go, Napoleon. He won’t bother us any more.”

Solo relaxed his grip altogether now and stared dazedly at the bleak little face. The head lolled limply. The shock, the impact, and the surprise had been too much for Absalom Green. Walker scrambled up from the floor and flexed his shoulders, looked around.

“Hey! What the hell—!” be growled, and started forward. Kuryakin was ahead of him. Miss Perrell sat on cushions against the far wall of the cabin. She sat very still, her head up, her pose unnaturally stiff, but her eyes were alive and blazing.

“Careful, darling,” she breathed. Kuryakin looked closer and caught his breath. A fine thread was looped under her chin and drawn up and away to the solid hinge of a port hole behind and over her head. “It’s monofilament fishing line,” she explained. “You’ll have to cut it.” Solo came, fumbling for his knife. With care they cut the tremendously strong line and released her head. “Now my hands,” she said, and leaned forward. “Mr. Green knows all kinds of pleasant tricks.”

Walker came to stare and clench his hamlike fists. “A pity you broke his neck, Mr. Solo,” he said very softly. “That was too good for him!”

“You’ll be all right?” Kuryakin demanded, and she smiled grimly.

“Give me a moment or two to get the circulation back and I’ll be right with you.”

“No need. You relax. This is our fight now.” Solo whirled in time to see Walker grabbing a stranger, a small man in white drill, picking him up with one hand and cuffing him into silence with the other.

“Steward,” he suggested.

“Probably sent along to fetch the owner. But Mr. Green can’t come. We’ll go instead. Illya, you can hold on here and look after Nan.”

“Not likely!” she objected at once. “I’m coming!”

“All right!” Solo shrugged and led the way, moving fast but warily. They regained the upper deck and heard again that greasily self-satisfied voice speaking not very far away.

“—duties, of course. But there are certain limits. I presume you are required to produce some kind of warrant before conducting a search?”

“We have already explained, sir.” First Lieutenant Willis was very patient. “We have no instructions to search, just to inspect the log and the articles of ownership, to be satisfied as to your identity. That’s all.”

“Not my identity, as it happens. I am merely a guest. But I have sent for the owner, and he should be here at any moment. If you gentlemen will step this way. I’m sure there’s no reason why we can’t do this in a civilized manner.

“Forward cabin, by the look,” Walker muttered. “There!” A flood of golden light spilled out from an opened door, a rectangle through which two slim figures moved, and then a third, a huge one. Solo slid forward and halted by that door, as it remained half-open.

“In a moment Mr. Green will be here—”

“I’m afraid he won’t.” Solo shoved the door open and stood in view. “Mr. Green won’t be able to make it. Sorry!”

Beeman whirled around. Just for one moment he lost that fine gleam of urbanity that covered him like a glaze. Hatred gleamed from his eyes. Then, just as swiftly, he had recovered.

“Solo!” The tone was chill dignity distilled. “Are you responsible for this? You fool!”

“Not so foolish as to believe you would honor a bargain.”

Beeman’s face rippled, indicating the whirlpool of thought beneath. “This man is raving.” He turned to Willis. “I imagine he has spun you some fantastic story about a lady being held aboard this craft. She is here, of

course!” He extended all the force of his personality now, radiating good fellowship. “I wouldn’t be so silly as to deny that. But she is here as a guest. Lieutenant, we are men of the world. I ask you to understand how awkward this could be. She is at present with Mr. Green—”

“Nice try,” Solo interrupted. “But no cigars, Beeman. Mr. Green has no say now. But Miss Perrell has. Let her in, Illya. She can still talk, Beeman, enough to tell what the real purpose is of her being here. And as an independent witness—Walker, show yourself to the man.” Solo moved to one side to let Walker appear in the light, but he watched Beeman closely. The fat man was tense but far from beaten yet.

“Miss Perrell”—he ducked his head courteously—“and Mr. Walker. As witness to what? I wonder. Miss Perrell appears to be whole and unharmed. But what of Mr. Green? What have you two done to him?” That voice grew hard as Beeman snatched at a straw and turned it into a club. “We can’t hear Mr. Green’s story, can we? Because you savages have killed him. Murderers!” He revolved on Willis again. “Lieutenant, I insist you carry out your duty as a responsible person. I insist you carry out a search, now, for Mr. Green’s body. And that you hold these two men responsible.”

Willis looked disconcerted at this twist. He eyed Walker. The young sub-lieutenant shrugged uneasily.

“He’s dead all right, Number One.”

“That does it!” Willis became firm. “Cox’n, you’d better take a walk back there and check—”

“Hold it!” Solo spoke now, suddenly very tense. “Just a moment. I know this cabin. Illya?”

“That’s right. I was just thinking the same thing. We’ve heard it.”

“Yes. Hardwood floor. Table in the middle. Window.” He went across to it, to verify that it went straight down to the sea, outside. “This is it, all right.” He turned back to the occupants of the cabin. “Keep well away from that table, Beeman. Cox’n Armitage, I want you to do me a favor. Just a little one. I’d like you to get down and take a look at the underside of that table.”

“What outrageous nonsense is this?” Beeman roared. “What do you expect to find, a bomb? Do I strike you as the suicide type?”

Solo ignored him, watched Armitage, who looked to Willis for a lead. Willis nodded resignedly and the chief petty officer went down on his knees to lean under and peer. And grunt.

“Blimey, there is something here, stuck up by the leg. A bomb?”

“It’s not dangerous to any of us,” Solo declared sternly. “Dangerous only to you, Beeman. It is a miniature tape recorder, planted there by the girl you called Marie. The girl you ordered beaten to death, right here in this cabin. And it recorded all that—I’ve heard it. You see, she took the tape when she left, when she hauled her broken body out of that window and drifted to the beach—”

Beeman exploded into action, moving incredibly faster than seemed possible for a man of his bulk. Nan Perrell went aside like a doll. Walker grunted and fell aside in the opposite direction. Kuryakin was hurled bodily aside as the fat man rampaged through the door and out into the dark. Solo tore after him, scrambling and hopping over the assorted bodies, charging out into the dark, peering about, just in time to see a gross form pose by the rail and then leap down into the sea. Without stopping to think, Solo ran like a hare for the rail, launched himself into a low dive, struck the water cleanly and plunged deep. Kicking, he arched over and shot back to the surface.

“A light!” he yelled. “Give us a light!”

Seconds later he heard Illya on the bullhorn. “Launch ahoy! Man overboard, port side!”

Then, very soon, a white beam split the darkness, and the launch snored capably through the water to pick them up, willing hands hoisted him inboard.

“Thanks,” he gasped, “but it’s not me you’re looking for. There’s another man down. I was right behind him, he can’t have gone far.”

He crouched in the bows, shivering and wet, while a sea man swung the searchlight on the wheelhouse roof and the launch quartered the sea patiently, but there was no sign. After half an hour Woods called him from the wheel.”

“Dead or alive, Mr. Solo, he’s a mile away by now. We’ll never find him in this. She’s starting to blow hard. Might as well give it a miss. Scrub around. You need a change of clothing anyway.”

The launch put back to *Trojan*. So did the small boat that had carried the stop and check party. This time the gathering in the *Trojan* wardroom had a different feel about it. Hope made his own position clear.

“My orders were to render all assistance to you two. I think you’ll agree matters have gone a bit beyond that now. I’m radioing a full report back,

plus a message from Miss Perrell to her superiors. For now, I propose to put a skeleton crew aboard the yacht and escort her back to Harwich, where the higher ups can sort things out whichever way they think fit. That's for later. Right now I have a different kind of problem. You see, we're just a destroyer. We're not designed to accommodate guests. Or prisoners. Hanged if I know which you are, to be honest. So look here, if you can give me assurance that there'll be no more malarkey, I propose putting you back on that yacht. After all, she's got the space."

"Sounds like fun." Nan Perrell grinned her crooked grin. "A trip on a millionaire's yacht, plus a naval escort. It will be something to look back on while I'm in jail."

"You won't do any time in jail," Walker growled. "Not if I have anything to say about it. I saw that fishing line!"

"You'll get your chance to talk at the proper time, Walker. All right, then, let's get you lot back there and get moving, shall we?"

The three of them gathered in the cabin where it had all started, now silent and a little weary. Solo found a seat and sagged.

"It's all gone cockeyed," he complained, and she stared at him.

"Don't run yourself into the ground, Napoleon. You've done wonders, you and Illya. Green's gone. Beeman's gone. The customs people will take this craft apart and find—"

"They won't find a thing!" Kuryakin disagreed. "Oh, Beeman and Green were smuggling something, sure enough, but I doubt if it's here. If only we could have held Green, made him talk!"

"Sorry about that, Illya. I hit him too hard."

"Now look!" She came to stand between them indignantly. "What about me? You saved my life, remember?"

Solo looked up at her. "You're safe, yes, and we're glad of that. Very glad. You see, as soon as we saw Beeman's note it was obvious that we had blazed a trail back to you that even a blind man could have followed. So it was our fault that you fell in. And to be honest, we never expected to see you alive again. Knowing Beeman's form, we had to assume you written off."

"But you came just the same."

"Because he had given us a clue where to find him, that's all."

A tap at the door interrupted them, brought Walker with a companion, the small steward. Solo saw now that he was Chinese and very woebegone.

“Fu Manchu, here, is a good boy now,” Walker chuckled. “Anything you want, just order. He’s brought coffee.”

The Chinese bobbed humbly. “Name Joe Lee, not Fu Manchu. You want supper, maybe?” He got no offers on that. Kuryakin asked:

“How about sleeping space?”

Lee blinked, recited as if from a map in his head. “This cabin, port forward, belong top guests. Four beds, two this side, two that. Clean and fresh all the time. Starboard forward used only for dinner and company, no sleeping, no sheets but can fix. Two little cabins midships. Two more aft, one for Missa Green. Which you want?”

“We hadn’t better disturb Green and the evidence. If you can make up the two midships cabins for me and Illya—”

“That’s enough!” Nan Perrell cut in again. “If I could sleep, which I doubt, I am not staying all alone in this cabin. Joe, you make up three of the four here. I’ll help you.”

Beneath their feet engines started to throb. Lee looked up from the sheet he was smoothing down and sighed. “Go now. Be in harbor soon. Then police come, plenty trouble.”

“For everybody,” Kuryakin agreed, and added something that made the little man turn his head abruptly and then scuttle for the door.

“Bring breakfast, one bell. Egg-bacon-coffee-grapefruit for everybody, is O.K.?” and then he was gone.

“What did you say to him, Illya?”

“Very wise old Chinese saying, not by Chairman Mao. A wise man stops when he has one hand full of trouble.”

“In other words, don’t bite off more than you can chew?”

“Something like that. It looks as if we have chewed up a lot more than we can bite off, this time.”

“And we can’t call out for help, either,” Solo pointed out. “Not this time.”

“You keep on writing me off,” she said, unbuttoning her dress and draping it over the foot of the bunk. “I’m still here, thanks to you. And this, I think, is where you are going to see just what Charles can do, when he tries. We will be taken care of, don’t you worry

“I hope you’re right,” Solo poured a cup for himself and sipped it. “Incidentally, how did you come to get suckered into Beeman’s clutches.”

“Confession.” She sat, extended a leg and began unbuckling her gun straps. “I overlooked the number one rule about phone calls. I got one, at seven-thirty. I was expecting Charles. Instead it was Monty Hagen, from Danby Hall. Would I care to run over and explain about your queer behavior the night before? And—I blush to admit it—I fell for it.”

“How do you mean, fell for it?” Kuryakin asked, crossing over and dropping to a knee beside her. “Here, let me help. Your fingers aren’t straightened out yet.”

“I should have rung back. Obviously. I could kick myself. Especially when I think about it. I mean, when in the world did any of the Danby household ever see daylight before eleven A.M.?”

“So it was a fake?”

“But of course!” She smiled gently, changed legs. “I should have known. Monty would be easy enough to mimic. Anyway, off I went, eyes full of stars about you two. And you may remember that dip in the road, just before the left hand curve away past the turnoff for Beeman’s place?”

Kuryakin looked up from his unbuckling. “Don’t tell me you went down there to take a look at the wreckage?”

“I’m not quite that crazy, Illya, dear. No, it was better than that. I went sailing down into that dip, into what looked like morning mist. Only it was tear gas. And the road was full of those metal spike things they use to ruin tires. I had a lively couple of minutes keeping myself on the road as all four wheels went flat. And then I was peering, bleary eyed, into the business end of several lethal looking guns. And that was it!”

“Neat!” Solo sighed. “Beeman thinks fast. Rushed you to Croydon, a private plane, on to Dungeness, and aboard. You knew about the note?”

“I watched them write it. I guessed you’d play his game, but I didn’t want that. You see, I had already written myself off. I saw him as he really was, and I knew there was not much hope. But now he’s gone, and that slimy little man Green, and we’re still here.”

“Right. Nothing more to do now but pick up the odd ends and hope that Charles will work a miracle or two.”

But it wasn’t all over, and Solo knew it. As he stretched out on his bunk and courted sleep there were problems still. That damned cube of power, for one. That was the main item, and where was it?

He was still grinding mental gears over that as the yacht went in and alongside the quay the next morning. *Trojan* had gone alongside first, and

young Walker, standing be side them on the upper deck, said in confidence:

“They’ll shove a brow over in a minute, for a gangway.”

But “they” didn’t. Instead, many heads came to peer down at the yacht: then ropes were lowered and men came swarming down, sharp eyed men in the uniforms of customs officers. One, older than the rest and looking harassed, approached the three.

“Miss Perrell, Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin?”

“That’s us. What can we do for your

“I have instructions to pass you three off just as you are.” He made it sound like punishment. “Anything you’d care to tell me, first? I mean, like what we might be looking for?”

“Drugs, possibly,” Nan offered.

“Also jewelry,” Solo murmured. “Unusual stuff. Small black things, cut into odd shapes.”

“You wouldn’t just happen to have them in your pocket now, would you, by any chance?”

“I wish I had. It would give me the greatest pleasure to turn them over to you at once, believe me.”

“I have instructions to do just that. Believe you, I mean. Oh well, it looks as if we have a right one, this time. You’re Sub-Lieutenant Walker, I take it? Right. Nobody leaves this ship until I say so. Nobody—except you three, of course.”

Kuryakin took hold of a dangling rope’s end and waved for slack. Then he looped and knotted swiftly, held it for Nan. “Sit in this loop, take this one around your back, hold on, and fend off with your feet!”

“Entertainments for the forces!” she murmured, arranging herself. “So far as I’m concerned, they’ve earned it. Hoist away!”

“She’s quite a girl!” Kuryakin declared, watching her exhibitionist progress. “It’s a pity we’re going to have to knock her down again.”

“Eh?” Solo stared at him wonderingly. “Why?”

“That thing about the seventh stone. I think I’ve got it. You keep on trying for a bit, see if you get it too. Take it from that phony phone call and see where it gets you.”

“I like you least when you’re being all enigmatic and Slavic,” Solo grumbled.

But he had to be content, knowing full well that Illya could be mulish when it suited him. Lieutenant Commander Hope met them on the *Trojan*

deck and managed to look a trifle less sad than usual.

“You’ve given us something to talk about for months. Especially you, my dear. Thank you. My orders are to let you carry on. Your clothes are dry, Mr. Solo. And I’m to hang on to that recorder, as evidence. I think that’s all. It’s been very nice having you.”

And then, surprisingly quickly, it was all over and they went once more along the quayside, until Nan Perrell halted with a snort of dismay.

“We should have borrowed some cash off him,” she declared. “How are we going to get back? I haven’t a penny on me. Can’t even make a phone call!”

“I think we’re saved.” Solo peered ahead, saw a familiar black and shiny bulk. “Friend Charles has ordered the car.”

He marched up to the tiny driver, smiling, and she grinned cheerfully back at him. “Ready when you are, sir,” she said.

FIFTEEN

THE DAIMLER had a let down seat against the backrest which enabled Nan to settle herself facing the two men. It also gave her the chance, which she took, to show off her long and shapely limbs to great advantage. She leaned forward seriously. “What was all that about jewels? Little black things?”

“Your chance to prove that you are not just a pretty face, Nan. We know what Beeman was after, what Mary Chantry stumbled onto.” With care, Kuryakin brought her up to date, relating what they had learned from Carpenter, what they had seen on Beeman’s desk, and then he carefully reminded her, and Solo, of what Mary Chantry had said about the seventh stone.

“You think that comes into it, Illya?”

“Definitely. It’s the key to the whole thing.”

“Some key. Oh well, if you say so.” Solo leaned back and scowled, chewing his lip. Nan looked from one to the other, settled on Solo.

“Is he often like this?”

“Pretty often. Likes to show off that he is a very smart Russian. The trouble is, he really is just that. The more foolish we look, the more his ego will swell.”

“You want a clue?” Kuryakin offered, and she made a face at him, but had to admit it in the end.

“All right, clever dick, what’s the clue?”

“That phone call from Monty Hagen—was genuine. No fake.”

Her amusement withered instantly. “You can’t possibly say that. It was an impersonation. It must have been,”

“Assume that it wasn’t and see what follows.”

“But it’s ridiculous! Monty Hagen?”

“You wanted a clue. Here’s another. Exhibition is camouflage. You said so yourself. You also said, remember, that Lady Herriott always, somehow, seemed to be on that same channel steamer that the drugs came in by. So you add it up. You are trying to smuggle something highly valuable into the country. You carefully plant some drugs on an innocent party—you said

yourself that the follow-ups were dead ends. You allow a tip to leak out. The customs men make their pounce. And your real smuggler walks through without so much as a glance from anyone."

"But they can't be!" she cried. "Not Maggie Herriott!"

"You mean you don't want to believe it, any more than you would have believed us about Uncle Henry if we had tried to tell you. You know, you keep on getting personal values mixed in with your thinking."

"I refuse to accept it," she said through her teeth. "Call Maggie anything else. A moral hedonist, halfwit, fool, any thing. But not crook!"

"Just like Uncle Henry," Solo stated grimly. "Dear, harmless, sweet old Uncle Henry. He couldn't be a murderer. He wouldn't cut your fingers off or put a garrote around your neck, not him! Never!"

She went white as death, and her voice was tight and small as she said, "All right. Yes, I asked for that. I was wrong about Beeman. But not. about Maggie Herriott!"

"She wears a halo?"

"Stop it! All right, you may have something. It's barely possible. But this time we must have evidence, some kind of proof. You two are not going to rampage all over Danby Hall, smashing and charging, breaking up the place, killing people, on some wild hunch! Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Certainly not." Kuryakin's voice was icily polite now. "That's the wrong way, isn't it? The next time your life is in danger I'll write a long letter to Charles, to tell him all about it, give him time to work out some careful plan, while you sit and count your fingers!"

"You know how to hurt," she whispered, "when you want to."

"Nobody is trying to hurt you," Solo growled at her, and then leaned forward to check with the Wren driver. "Miss Heston, do you have instructions where to take us?"

"No, sir. Wherever you say."

"Right. Back with you in a moment." He fixed Nan with a hard eye. "We can go to your place first. You'll get Charles on the phone and ask him where he has been getting the tipoffs about the drugs. Maybe that will go part of the way to establishing some kind of evidence. Now, you tell her the route." She did more. She had the car stopped while she removed herself to the front seat, and then they roared on once more.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Illya," Solo muttered.

“By which I gather that you have not yet cracked the riddle?”

“You know damned well I haven’t. But I will.”

And by the time they pulled into the forecourt of Nan’s home, he had. At least, he believed he had, but he left it unsaid as he saw the white lines of rage around her jaw and the way she strode indoors and to the phone.

“The inquiries will take a moment or two. No reason why we can’t rest and have a cup of something. Curtis!”

“Very glad to see you safe and sound again, miss. And you, Mr. Solo, Mr. Kuryakin. I hope you dealt with them properly?”

“I’m afraid we were rather crude and rough,” Kuryakin said, and Nan beamed him a glare of blue fire before putting on a smile for Miss Heston. It was almost fifteen minutes before Charles came through. Solo stood by her shoulder as she took it, and heard the old voice, tinged with irritation.

“I hope you have good reason for this, Nan. I don’t usually betray my sources, and it’s not always easy to back check them. However, you say Solo wanted to know, and I respect his guesswork. The tips have been corning, in the first place, from a chap called Hagen. That what you wanted?”

“That’s what we thought.” Solo grabbed the instrument as she choked on the words. “And not my intuition, Illya’s. He’s the inspired one between us. I just do the hard work. I think we’re going to have that power cube for you, soon.”

“Power cube? What the devil do you know about that?”

“Plenty. We’ll get back to you later.” He hung up and put a hand on her shoulder comfortingly. “Don’t let it throw you, Nan. We can all make mistakes. I’ve made a few, one way or another. Come on, let’s get it over with.”

Again she sat up front with Miss Heston, to point the way, but now there was a droop to her shoulders. She turned to point as they took the sharp dip she had told them about.

“There’s my poor old Princess.”

Danby Hall didn’t look nearly so fiendish by daylight, just an old and cozily weatherbeaten old mansion, with a gleaming white MG standing in the sunlight as they rolled to a stop.

“Nice car!” Solo commented, as they climbed out. “Who drives that, Evadne?”

“She and Monty share it between them. Shall we go in?”

They were approached by a stately butler, last seen by Solo in the guise of a Roman slave. He suppressed a grin at the thought.

“We’d like to see her ladyship, please,” he said.

“I will inquire—” the butler began, and was cut short by a twitter from the top of a magnificent stairway. Lady Herriott came trotting down.

“Nan! And the two fugitives! What a lovely surprise! I’m furious with you two, of course, for running away the other night, but I’ll forgive you if you’ll promise to come again some other time. Will you?”

“That’s hard to say. Lady Herriott, this is hardly a social call.”

“Oh!” She fluttered a hand anxiously. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know yet. I’d like to see your rubies, if possible.”

“These?” She twined her fingers in the string at her neck!

“And the other two sets. All at once, please!”

“Nan told you! Don’t you think it was a clever idea?”

“Very ingenious,” Kuryakin murmured. “Your own?”

“Heavens, no! I’m not a bit clever like that. No, Monty thought of it. He’s bright, you know. Come along and I’ll show you.” She went trotting back upstairs and along a broad passage rainbow-lit by sunlight through stained glass windows. A door stood open at the far end, leading to an interior that was, predictably, in all shades of green. Lady Herriott scurried to an old-fashioned escritoire, then paused in indecision.

“Monty takes care of all my jewelry and trinkets. He really ought to be here. But I don’t suppose he will mind. Here you are.” She reached into a recess and brought out a lacquered work box, lifted the lid and set it down. Kuryakin went forward to look, to put in his fingers and lift out a string of egg sized bloodred stones, interspersed with delicate gold filigree. Lady Herriott. bowed her head and slipped off the string she was wearing, added it to the rest.

“There you are!” she said triumphantly. “I will wager you can’t tell which is the genuine set!”

Kuryakin lifted out another, laid all three on the dark wood. He looked at her curiously. “You say this was Hagen’s idea? And, I understand, you can’t tell the difference yourself?”

“That’s right. Aren’t they good?”

“Very fine. Just one more thing. When you travel, you carry them all like this? All in that box?”

“Of course. That’s the box I keep them in.”

Solo sighed. He heard Nan Perrell gasp as it struck her. Kuryakin shook his head sadly. “Madam, you’re not safe to be let loose. Don’t you realize that this whole scheme to frustrate a possible thief, is useless? When all he has to do is lift the whole box and sort out one from the other later on, at his leisure?”

She stared, and then her face crumpled into total confusion. Watching her, Solo felt that she was either an incredible actress or just plain stupid. Then she said, “You must think me a fool. But still,” she rallied valiantly, “you must admit that it works. I mean, they haven’t been stolen, have they?”

“No? If you can’t tell the real from the fake, how do you know that any of them are genuine?”

This time Lady Herriott staggered, her face chalk white and showing its age. “You’d better sit,” Kuryakin advised. “There’s more. A lot more.” At that moment Evadne scampered into the room, dripping water and clutching a white bath towel negligently about her curves. She braked to a halt at the sight of company.

“Hello, you two! Hey, what’s all the panic about? Monty just came bursting into the bathroom demanding the car keys—”

“Car keys!” Solo snapped, heading for the door. There came the sudden snarl of a revving engine from outside.

“Hold it!” Nan Perrell called, and stepped to the window. “You’ll never catch him that way, but I can. She shoved the swinging pane, swept up her brief skirt with a double handed grab, rested her forearms on the ledge, and Kuryakin was there, looking over her shoulder. Her right hand weapon coughed and snapped. Down there the MG’s rear right wheel exploded loudly, lifting the tail of the car up and around. As it swung her left hand gun spoke, snapped, and the corresponding front wheel erupted loudly. The car heeled over, hung a moment, then fell back and bounced heavily. She leaned out into the sunlight.

“Hagen!” Her voice was like a silver bugle. “Come on out, nice and slow. Try anything funny and the next one’s for you!”

Kuryakin watched, saw the car heave and shake as the buckled door jerked open and Hagen tottered out, raising his hands in abject surrender.

“Nice shooting, Nan,” murmured Kuryakin, and lowered his palm to pat her, a gentle pat, more like a caress.

“Time and place for everything, Illya, remind me some other time. Now—Napoleon! You can go down and get him. Careful not to get in the line of fire, mind, but I doubt if he’ll give any trouble.”

She was right about Hagen. He came meekly back with Solo to the room where Nan was once more decorous but still holding one weapon, in case. In a chair, Lady Herriott sagged and looked like a mourner at her own funeral.

“It’s dreadful,” she wailed. “Those rubies—they’re antiques. I can never replace them!”

“I shouldn’t worry,” Kuryakin comforted her. “It’s my guess that Hagen has them stashed away somewhere, for insurance. Else why did he bolt?”

“I don’t understand!” Evadne cried. “What’s he done?”

“Cue for speech, Illya. You’re the one who knows all the twists in this thing. I know some, I think.”

“All right.” Kuryakin returned to the escritoire, picked up a ruby string, holding it by the clasp. “Please notice, thirteen stones. An unlucky number, some would think. Six a side, and the seventh one, the biggest of all, this one—is hollow!” He took it between finger and thumb and it was like a huge acorn in a cup of goldwork. He twisted firmly, and it came apart neatly. “You could conceal quite a lot in that, you know.”

“It’s empty!” Lady Herriott declared.

“Of course it is!” Hagen snarled. “Hollow, to save weight!”

“A plastic that is heavier than genuine ruby? I think not.” Kuryakin put down the string he held. He was watching the immaculate secretary like a hawk. “Let’s see if the others are empty too,” he murmured, and Hagen’s sag told him all he wanted to know. The second one was empty, but the third little blood red egg was occupied. A packet wad of white cotton yielded a tiny black thing carefully enclosed in glossy plastic.

Lady Herriott stared blankly.

“What is it?”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t know, madam. I owe you an apology for that. But I’m almost certain that you don’t know either, Hagen, or you’d never have let them rest here.”

The secretary wet his lips several times before he managed to speak.

“It’s a gemstone and very valuable. What more is there to know?”

“So. Beeman duped you just like all the rest. It is not a gem. It is—I’ll show you.”

“Careful, Illya!”

“All right, Napoleon. I’m not going to take any big chances. But I would like to see just what the potential really is. Kuryakin took the plastic —it was tube shaped—and squeezed one end gingerly, easing the black crystal along until it showed partly exposed. Pausing to look around at the attentive faces just once, he took finger and thumb of his right hand and pressed them firmly against the black stuff. In that moment Solo felt a sudden, irrational and surging sense of hatred for the slim, fair haired Russian agent. As he moved instinctively he saw Hagen stiffen, his pretty face twisted into a snarl that epitomized exactly what Solo felt himself. Checking savagely, stamping on his own emotions, he cast a glance around and caught his breath. Lady Herriott had risen from her seat, her eyes wide on Kuryakin. Evadne had forgotten her towel entirely in putting out her arms, and over by the window, Nan Perrell had let her weapon slip to the floor as she surged slowly from the window toward the Russian agent. On all three faces was a radiance, a glow that Solo had seen only in Italian paintings of adoration and reverence. In that instant the whole room was charged with an invisible force. Then Kuryakin took his finger away, the magic of invisible power faded, and he sighed, and shivered.

“I wouldn’t want to do that again,” he said very softly. “That’s the kind of power that corrupts!” Then he looked at his audience and his eyes widened. “You too, Napoleon?”

“Me too, Illya. Just as well I was warned. I could have shot you without another thought. Hatred. For the ladies, just the opposite.”

Nan Perrell sagged back against the wall. “I didn’t believe you, Illya, when you told me about those things, but I do now. And that was only one! What would it be like with the whole set?”

“Never mind any set!” Evadne whispered. “Just do that again, please !”

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“Yes, please!” her mother echoed. “It made me feel like a girl again.”

Kuryakin cleared his throat awkwardly, pressed the exposed corner of the crystal against the desk top until it was safely submerged again, and laid it carefully aside.

“That is just one,” he pointed out. “There are twenty-seven in the full set. Where are they, Hagen?” The secretary looked stubborn, set what jaw he had, and Kuryakin sighed. “You have a jewel box, Lady Herriott?”

“Yes. In there. But Monty has the key.”

Solo held out his hand. “Give! Or not, just as you like. I’d have fun taking it from you.” Hagen swallowed audibly and yielded the key. The box contained plenty of other things, but most important was the sight of twenty-five more little black things in plastic covers.

“There you are, Napoleon. One more to come. Guess how.”

“You can do yourself some good, Hagen, by talking. You have the last one all laid on, don’t you?”

Hagen nodded dumbly.

“Right. Now, how were you supposed to deliver the set?”

“Her ladyship has an invitation. A pleasure cruise on a yacht.”

“So that’s it. All right, we can fill in the rest. Now pin back your ears and get this good. The yacht is no longer available. The owner is dead, and at this moment, the customs authorities are taking it apart bolt by bolt. Your best bet, by far, is to go through with the arrangements already made, collect the last piece, and turn it over, openly, to Lady Herriott. We will take these we already have and turn them over to somebody who knows exactly what to do with them. Lady Herriott, I imagine there will be a pretty generous reward for recovering these, so there’s something for your favorite charity.”

“Oh!” Her expression brightened at once. “Do you really think so? That would be nice. Monty, you have been wicked, haven’t you? Making me break the law. But I’m sure he won’t do it again, Mr. Solo.”

“He hadn’t better, not with what we’ve got on him. Well, that’s about it, Illya?”

“I think so. Lady Herriott, you’ll be informed in due course. I imagine Miss Perrell will take care of that. Good bye, Miss Evadne, it has been a pleasure. After you, Napoleon.”

As they passed through the hall Nan Perrell sighed and grinned.

“You two have a way of wrapping things up so tight you make me feel superfluous. You don’t need me at all.”

“On the contrary.” Kuryakin aimed a finger at the wrecked MG. “You did that. Very good shooting.”

“Oh well!” She shrugged and grinned at him. “It was nothing.”

“No, wait.” He caught her arm and pulled her around to face him. “I also have to apologize about Lady Herriott. She wasn’t involved. You were quite right to defend her.”

She stared at him a long moment, then put her arms around his neck and kissed him very warmly. Then, letting him go, she whispered, “Thank you for letting me join the company on an even basis. You were right, really. We have to suspect everybody—except ourselves.”

“You can even suspect each other,” Solo suggested. “Even me.

“Oh you! I shudder to think what would have happened if you had held that magic crystal in your fingers. Besides, remember the navy’s watching us!”

They reached the waiting Daimler, and Solo stooped to grin in at the Wren driver, who was looking a little strained. “All over now,” he told her. “No more excitement. Just take us back to Admiralty House, please.”

This time Nan sat in her favorite position, between them. She looked somewhat downcast, and Solo remarked on it.

“I’m sorry.” She put a hand on his knee. “But can you blame me? The only two men I’ve ever cared for, and I’m going to lose both of you soon. I don’t suppose we’ll ever meet again, but you’ve a home, whenever you like, with me. Don’t forget that, either of you. I mean it.”

“We’ll have to leave you some odd ends to clear up,” Solo said, “after we’ve seen Charles and handed over those nasty baubles to him. There’s John Guard, for instance. He needs someone to keep an eye on him until he’s fit and well again.”

“We never did get that carving for Mr. Waverly, Napoleon. Maybe we ought to run down there and see about it anyway.”

“And I’ll come with you,” she decided. “I’m due for a holiday anyway, and it will give me the chance to hold on to you two for a bit longer.”

“And there’s Louise,” Solo murmured. “I’d like to think she had a friend or two for a while.”

Their Mini was still standing there, waiting, as the naval car rolled to a stop. As they got out both men made a point of shaking hands with the little Wren driver and congratulating her on a fine show; then they regained their own car. Nan took the wheel, and they set off for Charles.

“You do it well,” she said over her shoulder as they weaved through the traffic. “That little sailor girl will have stars in her eyes for weeks. I know just how she feels.”

“Don’t we get blindfolded this time?” Kuryakin demanded, more to change the subject than anything else, and she snorted gently.

“You know that’s not necessary now. I know who Char1es is, and there is no reason why you shouldn’t.” They were able to guess when she piloted them to the vicinity of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and they knew for sure when they discovered that they had to sit in the dark once again. As she told them, he was always in the dark, being totally blind. But there was nothing wrong with his voice as he greeted them and listened intently to the story.

“I shall certainly see that any reward goes to Lady Herriott,” he said. “I know she will put it to good use. I only wish I could reward you two as well.”

“Not for us, sir, but there are a few things you could do. For the crew of the *Trojan*, and that launch, for instance. Some kind of indication from us that they did a very nice job?”

“I can arrange that, yes. The navy has methods.”

“And a certain Wren, Miss Heston, who drives like a demon and has all the nerve anybody could want.”

“That too, Mr. Kuryakin.”

“And me!” Nan Perrell declared. “I claim a reward. A day or two off duty. A holiday, Charles. I’ve earned it.”

“Hmm!” The old voice sounded amused. “You have? Very well.”

“One last thing, sir,” Solo remembered. “If you could somehow fix it that one Raymond Carpenter, newsman, gets an exclusive on the story about the power cube? He helped us a lot.”

“And you’ve helped me a lot, gentlemen. Any time you might contemplate retiring from U.N.C.L.E. you must look me up.”

They took turns driving and stopped for lunch on the way down to the coast, a very late lunch full of reminiscences and chuckles. Now that some of the ice had broken around Nan’s opposition to the male sex, she was very good company. By the time they struck the coast road that would lead them to the lonely seaside bungalow she had to sigh and admit:

“I don’t know when I’ve enjoyed myself more. I didn’t know it was possible to just relax and be natural with a man. I’m going to miss you two dreadfully.”

“That’s why I said,” Solo reminded her, “that somebody should keep an eye on Johnny. You’ll like him a lot. In fact, if you play it right, you might be able to recruit him into your company. I know he’s supposed to be retired, but that’s not natural for a man like him.”

“There it is,” Kuryakin warned, and Solo, driving, pulled over to the side and scowled in thought a moment.

“Look,” he suggested, “you drive on to the hospital and see Johnny, tell him the story. We’ll go on in and clear up any oddments, get something cooking for when you get back, all right?”

They watched her drive off, and Solo sighed. “She’s quite a girl. In a way it’s a good thing our vacation is almost over, Illya. Much more of her society, and I would have serious temptations.”

“It would be a hectic life, Napoleon. I can’t imagine her ever being domesticated, somehow.”

He leaned on the door, and it swung open. The tiny hall way inside was dark by contrast. As he stepped forward something hard and heavy struck the base of his skull. He heard a cry, not his own, as he plunged forward into blackness.

He came awake to a throb in his head and the realization that he was tightly tied up, gagged, and lying down on something hard. Opening his eyes, he looked along the floor, to see Solo opposite him, equally bound and silenced. At the table, sitting so that he could command the door leading in from the road, was Henry Beeman, squatting on a low stool and ravenously digging in to a meal spread out before him.

“You can’t talk,” he said, through mouthfuls and chewing, “but I can. I like talk, as you know. I also like working out solutions in advance, as you also know. You must remember,” he told them, “that *Oberon* was my yacht. Your damned customs people will examine it. They may, just, discover a tight shut compartment well below waterline. If they open it the ship will flood and sink. Possibly!” He stopped to chuckle heavily. “That compartment opens downwards, to the sea, like a diving bell. It contained breathing apparatus and survival equipment. Forethought, Mr. Kuryakin, Mr. Solo. You brought me safely back to Harwich. From there I was able to make contact with people who owe me things. And so, here I am, waiting for you. I knew you would return here, some of you, eventually.” He chuckled again, and Solo groaned as he strained at his bonds. Beeman shook his head slowly.

“Oh no, Mr. Solo. Not this time. I confess I had not counted on catching both of you quite so soon. Or Miss Perrell, who has gone off in the car and will return eventually, eh? All of you. And this time there will be no escape. I am handling things myself. You have done me grievous harm, between

you, and I must devise a fitting vengeance. Did you know that I was on the short list for a title? Not now, of course. You'll pay for that, I assure you. And I will have the power cube, eventually. Oh yes. You fools don't know what to do with it, you see. I do. I'll get it back. But you will never know. You won't be alive to see it."

The man was obviously raving. Solo wrenched at his bonds, but there was no hope there. Illya looked desperate too. And Nan was coming back. He strained again, until the blood hammered in his head, but there was no slack. Beeman had done his work well. Now the fat man pushed away his plate, took a bottle of milk and guzzled from it greedily, then slammed it down on the table. His huge paw took up a gun, a big bore monster like the one Green had used.

"We will wait," he said, "for Miss Perrell to return. The waiting will provide ample time for me to devise things. I imagine she would do almost anything to save your lives, eh? I shall suggest some things, and you shall watch while she does them. When your bodies are eventually found, there will be a lot for the authorities to speculate about. And you know the kind of thoughts they always think, don't you?"

With his head against the stone floor, Kuryakin felt rather than heard the steps outside. But Beeman was as acute as a fox. He stiffened, leveled the gun at the door, and waited.

Kuryakin heaved madly, trying to make a sound, any kind of sound, as warning, but it was futile. The door opened.

"Hello there!" She strode in. "Guess who—"

"Stop quite still, Miss Perrell! Ah—but this is truly an unexpected treat! Mr. Guard, isn't it? Come in, right in!"

John Guard stepped inside the door, pushed it shut with a casual hand and settled himself, feet slightly astride, alongside Nan Perrell. The tanned face was as bleak as ever, looking as if it had been planed out of teak, and the crisp brown hair lay flat back from a forehead and brow that always looked armor plated, somehow. Tiger yellow eyes bored into Beeman, looking right through him.

"Johnny," she said softly, "this is Henry Beeman. The man who had Mary Chantry destroyed."

"I'm glad," Guard said. Just that, but there was death in his words.

"Your pleasure is as nothing to mine, Guard. My misfortunes began here, in this room, when Green failed to kill you. I shall not fail. Miss

Perrell, there is some cord left over there. Get it. Tie him up!”

“Stay still, Nan!” Guard kept his voice quiet, but there was power in it. “Take no notice of him at all.”

“Dramatic, Mr. Guard, but I hold the gun, remember?”

“So?” Guard stared him down. Solo saw his left hand move very slightly, to touch hers just for a moment, and then fall to his side again. Then he saw something that took him back several years, as Guard seemed to settle into himself, like a spring winding up, and his head moved, just fractionally, from side to side. Guard began to talk, quietly and flatly, without emotion.

“Like so many other people, Beeman, you imagine you can point a gun at someone and make that person behave. In a book, perhaps, or on a screen, that will pass. But not in real life. That’s just a gun. If you shoot me you will effectively stop me from doing anything, yes, but you can’t make me, or anybody else, do anything.” Unless you were watching for it, you would never notice, Solo thought, that Guard was easing himself gradually away from Nan Perrell. Beeman didn’t notice it until there was quite a gap.

“Stand still, damn you!” he squealed, and the weapon in his hand began to swing from one target to the other.

“Two of us,” Guard pointed out, still quietly. “And only one of you. And you know, don’t you, that you may get one of us, but the other one will get you, absolutely and for sure.”

Solo held his breath as the gun in Beeman’s hand swung nervously to and fro and sweat broke out of the fat man’s face. It was a moment that seemed to stretch out eternally. Time stood still. The gun swung from Guard. In that instant he leaped like a tiger, forward and down, arms out to grab. The gun jerked back, spoke deafeningly, and Solo saw the white splinters erupt from the corner of the table as Beeman lowered his aim.

In that same instant Nan Perrell crouched, swept with both hands at her hem, and two tiny weapons coughed in unison, two snap-cracks that slammed Beeman back and away and flat, solidly, on the floor. There was just one strangling cry, arid then the life ran out of him. Nan rushed forward.

“Johnny! Did he hit you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What the hell were you trying to do, commit suicide?” Her voice shook as she touched him.

“You’ll have to help me up,” he muttered. “These damned bandages are like a straitjacket. Easy now, let me get a hand to the table. Right. I can manage.” He levered erect, patted the corner of the table, and grinned thinly. “It worked out. Made a mess of my table, though.”

“Damn the table!” She was still shaking. “You could have been killed!”

“A chance I had to take, Nan. You see, you had the weapons. I had nothing to hit him with. So I had to draw his fire. Show me those guns?”

She handed one of the tiny weapons to him, and he shook his head at it ruefully. “Since my time. You’ll have to show me how to handle these.”

She shivered, took back the gun, slapped both of them away with quick precision, and turned to the two captives.

“Excuse me not helping,” said Guard. “I can’t bend down very well, the way they have me strapped and bandaged. Thanks anyway for letting me in on the grand finale.”

“I can’t imagine anybody keeping you out,” Solo said, tugging at the loosened cords and scrambling to his feet. “I think it really is all over this time. And I can’t say I’m sorry.”

“Nor me.” Kuryakin came to offer a hand and grin. “You law abiding British take some keeping up with.”

Guard frowned in bewilderment. Solo coughed. “That’s a private joke, John. At least, I think it’s meant to be a joke. Now, I suppose we have a disposal and clean up job to do again. If we have to scrub your floor many more times we’ll apply for caretaker wages.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be!” Nan took his arm protectively. “We are going to stay here awhile and look after you. Aren’t we, boys?”

“We are?” Solo exclaimed. “Oh! I don’t recall—”

“There’s room,” Guard put in. “And you’re welcome. You know that.”

“Hmm!” Kuryakin scratched his chin reflectively, looked at Solo and then at Nan. Then at Guard. “Room for one more? A lady who needs rest and recuperation?”

“I think so.” Guard looked puzzled again.

“Louise?”

“That’s right, Napoleon. She needs the fresh sea breezes and looking after.” He eyed Nan Perrell. “And you need something to slow you down. With three men all to yourself you could get spoiled!”

[1] See Man From U.N.C.L.E. #8 *The Monster Wheel Affair*